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A Wayne Morgan Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

Vol. XXIII, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION February, 1948

COMPLETE NOVEL

The Phantom Forty-Niner

by Walker A. Tompkins

When a dangerous live ghost stalks Lodefork, the Masked Rider and his pard Blue Hawk ride into action to protect the community from a relentless wave of robbery and murder! Wayne Morgan battles a ruthless combine of killers! **13**

COMPLETE NOVELET

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Swift and certain six-guns bring roaring justice to the lawless as young Cran Bishop dons a wounded marshal's star to stage a trail town cleanup!

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Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly do some fancy fence-mendin' for the bronc toppers

AND

TRAIL TALK *by Foghorn Clancy* **6**
A department for readers conducted by America's foremost rodeo expert

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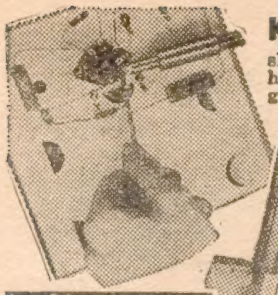

KIT 1 (left) I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio Soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.

KIT 2 (left) Early in my course I show you how to build this N. R. I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.

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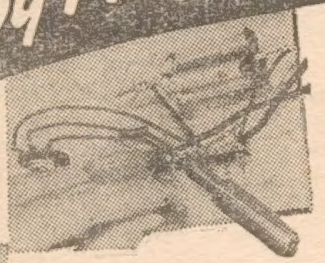
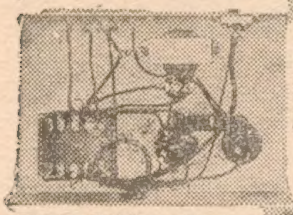
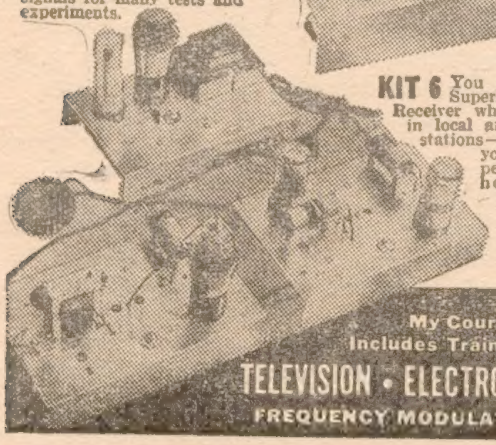


KIT 3 You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.

KIT 5 Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



KIT 6 You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

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GREETINGS, waddies, toss your twine on a bronc in the corral and let's take off for another trail ride and more Trail Talk. After you have saddled your cayuse, if he has not long been broken to the saddle, always untrack him before mounting. By this I mean—when you have saddled a horse, especially on cool mornings, always lead him a few feet before mounting.

This is known as untracking, and a horse is not so near apt to buck when you have mounted him after untracking as otherwise. Because if it is cool and he feels like bucking a few jumps he is apt to "break-in-two" or, in the vernacular of the range, start bucking, when you begin leading him—and if he does not buck when you start to lead him then he is not apt to buck when you mount him. If he does start bucking, you can stop him, can show him the error of his ways, and he is likely to behave once you are in the saddle.

Horses Are Funny

Horses are, in a way, peculiar animals. In a way they are automatons. What they do one time, they do the next time. If a horse is hurt by any object, he will always afterward shy at or be afraid of that object.

Several years back I was associated with a group of men who shipped in several cars of wild horses from Montana for a rodeo. We used them all season in the arena and some of them did not keep bucking as they should. They would still buck to a certain extent, but they did not do the job in contest style, so back on the ranch in Texas, after the rodeo season was over, we started in to break those that were not good buckers and get them ready for use as arena saddle horses the next season.

We started in riding them, making them buck until they were tired of it, getting all the bucking out of their systems, and when we would mount one we would continue to ride him until he was tired.

A Very Strange Animal

One of the cowboys, Grady Smith, mounted a nice-looking sorrel horse and made him buck a few jumps. Then the horse ran for a short distance, and seemingly with all the wildness and bucking spirit taken out of him slowed down to a walk, apparently completely broken to the saddle. We were riding with bridles and bits, whereas all the season before these horses in the bucking string had been ridden only with a hackamore.

Grady wanted to turn the horse, and without thinking that he was on a supposed wild and unbroken horse, laid the reins over as he would in turning a horse that had been broken to rein Western style. To his surprise the horse turned. Grady then began reining the horse and he would respond like an old cutting horse. Grady brought the horse back to the corral and gave me a demonstration. The horse was one of the best reining horses I have ever seen!

It was easy to figure that this horse had at one time been an excellent cowhorse, but just how and why he was turned out with the wild herd was hard to understand.

Later in the day Grady rode the horse down to the post office at the little town a couple of miles from the ranch. On the way down Grady had ridden through the ranch gate after it had been opened by others, but on returning he was alone and dismounted, opened the gate, led the horse through and closed the gate. As he started to mount again, the horse jerked loose from him and ran!

(Continued on page 8)

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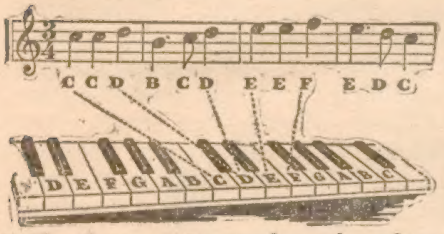
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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

The horse was roped and brought back, and Grady took him to the same spot where he had started to mount before and held him fast and mounted. After he mounted the horse and rode him away from the gate, the animal was again as gentle as one would wish.

Here's How We Figured It

We figured that this steed had been a good cowhorse, and the owner of the horse had probably led him through a gate, and was in the act of remounting when either a bee stung the animal, or something else happened that caused him to bolt. Perhaps the rider had his foot already in the stirrup, and when the horse bolted was caught and dragged, possibly injured, and the horse then just turned loose with the wild herd.

But, whatever time had elapsed between the time of his being turned loose to roam the prairies, and the time we were breaking him, he had not forgotten that there was apt to be pain when he was led through a gate and remounted, and it took a long time to break him of the habit of trying to bolt after being led through a gate.

Well, now that you have your cayuses saddled, we will begin our trail jaunt. Suppose we go westward over a part of what was once the Goodnight-Loving cattle trail, but instead of following on to Horseheads Crossing, which was one of the most dangerous spots along any of the old time cattle trails, we will swing a little to the north and visit El Paso.

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(Continued on page 10)

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 8)

which is now known as Juarez. Most of the inhabitants of both El Paso and Juarez were Mexicans, and business was confined to exchanging supplies for ore with the mining companies of Chihuahua, and to selling corn, beef and flour to the chain of military posts in northwest Texas.

El Paso was quite a transportation center, as regards transportation of the early and slow variety. It was not a railroad town and of course had no fine airport as it now has, but it had four stage lines.

The fine Concord coaches of the Overland Hail Company, operating between St. Louis and San Francisco, passed along its dusty main street. Three other lines connecting with Santa Fe, San Antonio and Chihuahua points had the terminus of their routes in El Paso.

They Carried Six-Guns

While El Paso usually slept during the sunshine, or like other early frontier towns, was quiet and sleepy by day, it had its eruptive moments. The pioneers were men of positive, self-asserting characters. Each felt that when he was wrong that it was up to him to right that wrong, and they seldom if ever complained to the law, or what little law there was, but nearly all of them carried six-guns at their belts for the purpose of protecting their own lives and righting any real or imaginary wrongs inflicted upon them.

The center of activities in the town was the post office managed by "Uncle Ben" Dowell, who, in connection with the post office and in the very same room, operated a saloon and several gambling tables. Most

(Continued on page 103)

FIGHT INFANTILE PARALYSIS

Join the MARCH OF DIMES

JANUARY 15-30

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a nonprofit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

Not For General Distribution

Sincere men and women, in search of the truth —those who wish to fit in with the ways of the world—are invited to write for a complimentary copy of the sealed booklet, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how to contact the librarian of the archives of AMORC for this rare knowledge. This booklet is not intended for general distribution; nor is it sent without request. It is therefore suggested that you write for your copy to Scribe J. M. B.

The ROSICRUCIANS
[AMORC]
San Jose California

TOM STOPPED THE RUNAWAY AND THEN . . .

WATCHED BY HER DAD AND A PASSERBY, "BABS" WEBB IS GIVING HER FAVORITE TROTTER HIS MORNING WORKOUT WHEN . . .

STEADY, JEB!

JUMP, BABS!

THE FEAR-CRAZED ANIMAL SNAPS A REIN AND GALLOPS BLINDLY AT THE FENCE

WHOA, BOY! IT'S ALL OVER

WHEW! THAT WAS CLOSE. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, BABS?

YES, THANKS TO MISTER . . .

TOM ADAM'S MY NAME. JUST DRIVING THROUGH

LUNCH? YOU'RE VERY KIND, BUT I'M HARDLY PRESENTABLE. BEEN DRIVING SINCE MIDNIGHT AND . . .

YOU CAN CLEAN UP AT THE CLUB. COME ON

AND HERE'S MY RAZOR

THIS BLADE'S A SWEETHEART! MY FACE FEELS GREAT!

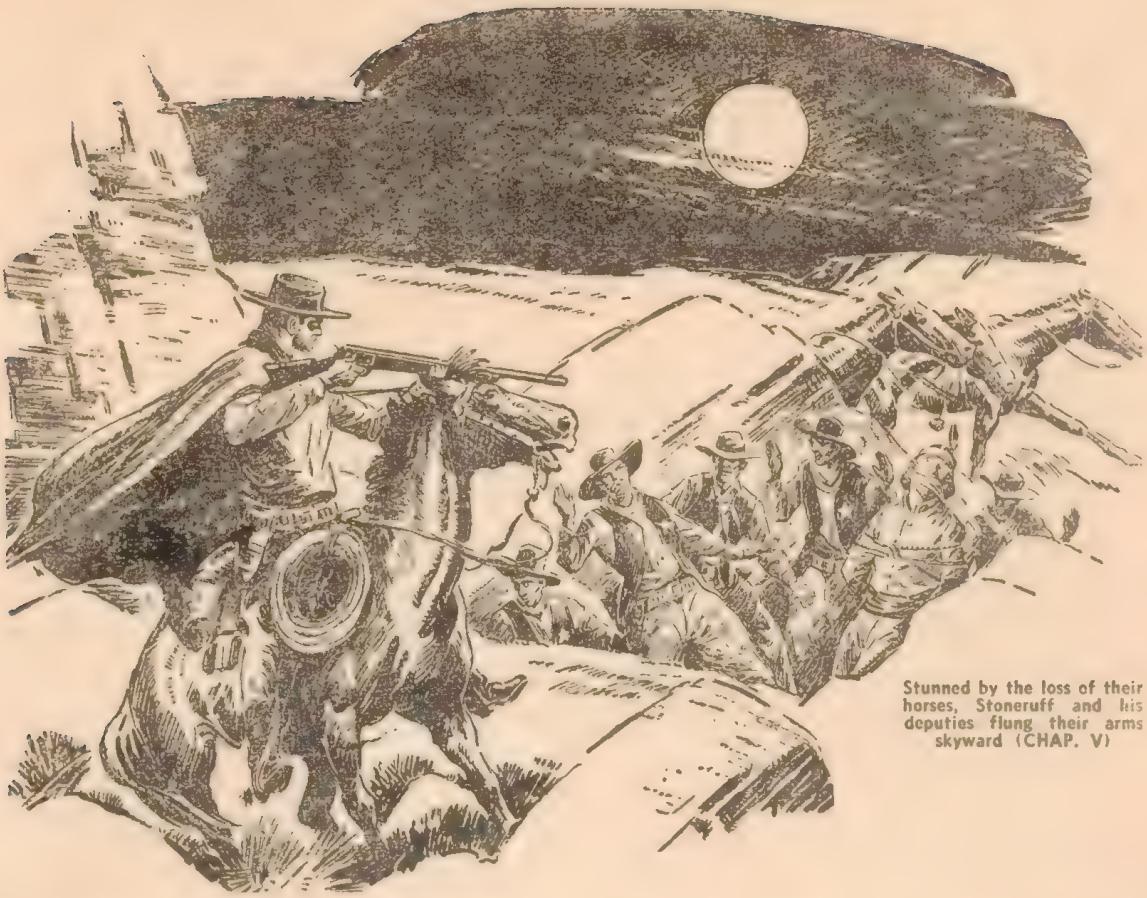
TOUGH WHISKERS ARE NO PROBLEM FOR THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN

I WISH YOU COULD SEE ME DRIVE IN THE CLUB HANDICAP THIS SATURDAY

HE'S CERTAINLY HANDSOME

SATURDAY? TRY AND KEEP ME AWAY!

YOU'LL FIND SHAVING IS QUICKER, EASIER AND MORE REFRESHING WITH **THIN GILLETTES.** **NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE IS SO KEEN AND SO LONG LASTING.** AND, FURTHERMORE, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION AND DISCOMFORT CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES BECAUSE EVERY THIN GILLETTE IS MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. TO GET REAL SHAVING SATISFACTION . . . **USE THIN GILLETTES**



Stunned by the loss of their horses, Stoneruff and his deputies flung their arms skyward (CHAP. V)

THE PHANTOM FORTY-NINER

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

When a dangerous live ghost stalks Lodefork, Wayne Morgan and his Yaqui pard ride into action to save the community from a relentless wave of robbery and cold-blooded murder!

CHAPTER I

Killer of the Cactus

CAL STAGG breathed easier when he had tooled the creaking freight wagon over the divide and faced the sun-punished slope of badlands ahead. With twelve crates of bullion stacked in the Conestoga box and the "Phantom Forty-Niner" known to be lurking in this section of the Arizona border, Stagg had pulled out of Lodefork that morning with a haunting prescience that he had embarked on a suicide haul. Now, surely, the worst was over.

Only the presence of old "Eagle-Eye" Yorkup hunkered on the jouncing seat beside him had decided the grizzled old wagoneer to risk the passage of Tinspout Pass today.

There was a saying going the rounds in

The Masked Rider Furnishes a Combine of

Lodefork that the ambush trap couldn't be laid which old Eagle-Eye would fail to spot before he drew within shotgun range. And the veteran guard had facts to back his legend of invincibility. Whether it was the devil's own luck or the trace of Indian blood in his veins, Eagle-Eye Yorkup had an instinct for scenting ambuscades.

Luck, instinct, a charmed life—whatever it was, Yorkup had worked for Wells-Fargo and sundry freighting outfits along the Mexican border for the majority of his sixty-odd years, and had survived so many drygulch traps that he had lost count of them.

That was why Eagle-Eye Yorkup demanded, and got, triple pay whenever he rode guard on a bullion wagon bound for Sacatone and its railhead. To date, no road agent had ever managed to loot a gold shipment guarded by Yorkup and his old twin-bore Remington.

But now the Phantom Forty-Niner was on the prowl again, after having dropped out of sight for a period of ten years. The Phantom Forty-Niner—so called because superstitious Mexican *pelados* believed him to be the reincarnated spirit of Joaquin Murietta, celebrated *bandido* of California's gold rush epoch—was known to be lurking somewhere in the region of Tinspout Pass.

Two of Hogan & Mulkey's freight wagons had already been halted by the mysterious buccaneer of the badlands. In each case, results had been the same. The shotgun guard had been slain from ambush in Tinspout Pass, Hogan & Mulkey had lost the bullion entrusted to their keeping, and the thoroughly terrified drivers had brought their empty wagons back to Lodefork with the report that the Phantom Forty-Niner had vanished without trace in the Thundergust uplands, with loot far too heavy for a mere mortal to carry.

Even so, gamblers in Lodefork were posting three-to-one odds that the Phantom, whether ghost or flesh and blood, would meet his doom if he tackled a bullion shipment that Eagle-Eye Yorkup had been paid to guard.

THUS it was, when the Golderado Cooperative elected to risk a third major shipment of gold bars with the Hogan & Mulkey line, the two partners had seen fit to take out "bandit insurance" in the person of Lodefork's bullet-proof freelance guard, Yorkup. If the bullion got safely to Sacatone, Yorkup's exorbitant fee for a day's work would be a cheap investment.

The Arizona sun stood at the zenith of its orbit when Cal Stagg put the Spout summit behind him. With Eagle-Eye at his side, spitting gobbets of tobacco juice over the swing span's cruppers at periodic intervals, his rheumy eyes photographing every detail of the familiar landscape, Cal Stagg finally began to relax.

The barren wastes of the Thundergust's east slope offered few hiding places where an ambusher might seek to outwit old Eagle-Eye's fantastic luck by means of a long-range bullet. Besides, a man riding a jouncing Conestoga over the chuckhole-pitted ridge road made an uncertain target at best.

"Looks like yuh buffaloed the Phantom, Yorkup," Stagg chuckled through his brindle whiskers. "Tol Hogan will pony up a fat bonus for the both of us when we get back to Lodefork with the railroad's receipt for this *oro* we're haulin'."

Eagle-Eye Yorkup shifted the weight of the twin-barreled Remington across his scrawny knees and grunted skeptically. The worst of their journey was behind them now, and had passed without incident. But Yorkup owed his rep to unceasing vigilance.

"I'll cash a bonus chit," he remarked flatly, "when I've nailed this Phantom hombre's hide to a fence pole, not afore."

Jogging down the dusty grade, flanked on either side by open slopes so scantily foliaged that a whiptail lizard would have found difficulty in taking concealment, Eagle-Eye granted himself time out to shave a fresh quid of tobacco from the black plug he carried.

As he opened his clasp knife a tremor of apprehension—the old familiar instinct of impending danger—chilled the hairs on Yorkup's neck-nape. His eyes were focused on a thicket of scrawny *ocotillo* growing on the lip of the cutbank twenty yards ahead.

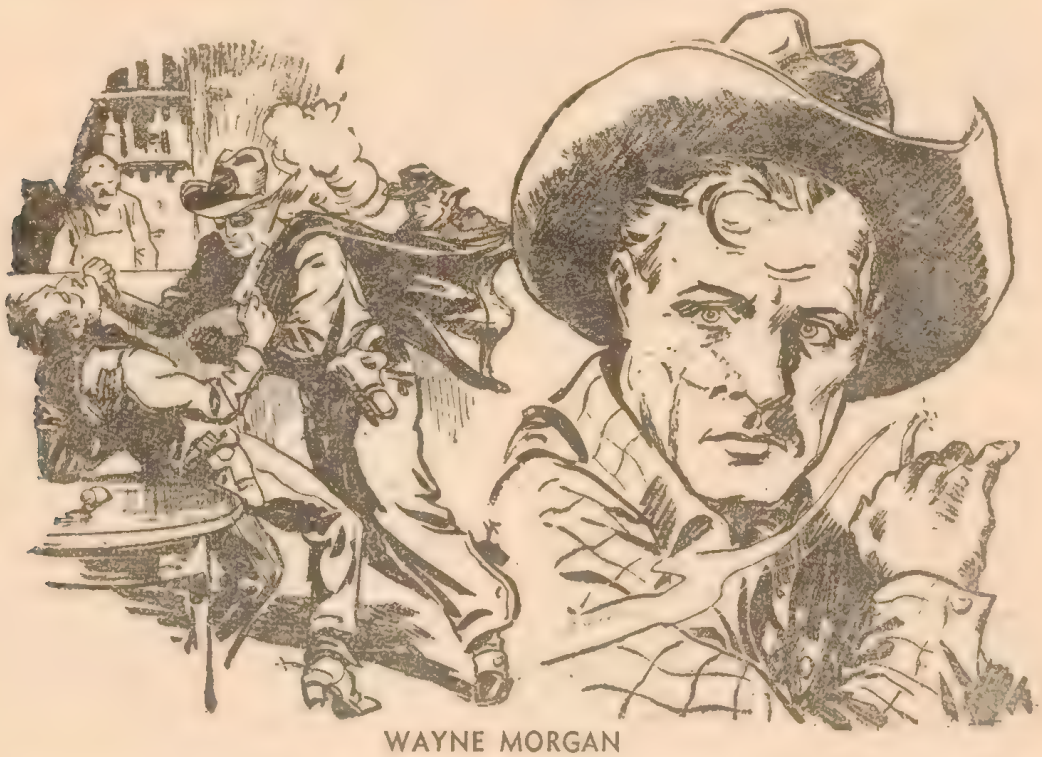
A withered stalk of dead cactus had fallen across a lava slab, its shadow slanting down the shale bank to touch the road. The spiny growth behind the fallen

stalk was not tall enough to hide a coiled rattler, let alone an ambusher.

What Eagle-Eye Yorkup could not know, this side of eternity, was that a .30-30 barrel was secreted inside the pithy cactus stalk. He was cutting a hunk from his tobacco plug when the fallen stalk moved slightly on the lava slab, but he attributed it to a vagrant gust of wind.

rainbow-hued serape which history identified with the long-dead California bandit, Joaquin Murietta.

Cal Stagg, still breathing but momentarily blind, lay slumped over his footboard and therefore did not see the Phantom Forty-Niner jump nimbly down the outbank to grab the headstalls of the lead horses, bringing the team to a dusty halt.



WAYNE MORGAN

Cal Stagg heard the shattering report of the rifle, spotted the blast of muzzle flame and the gunsmoke spewing from the shattered end of the cactus stalk.

At the same instant Eagle-Eye Yorkup dropped his clasp knife and gasped, his body jolted by a steel-jacketed slug drilling his chest. The shotgun guard came to his feet, and in so doing let his cocked Remington slide off his knees to hit the footboard. The weapon's hair triggers let go and a double charge of #4 buckshot ripped into Cal Stagg's abdomen at point-blank range.

Neither man saw the incredible thing which happened next. The *ocotillo* clump moved aside like a kettle lid to reveal the outsized post-hole excavated beneath its roots. Out of the hole came a tall, lithe figure wearing the Mexican sombrero and

Clinging to consciousness, Cal realized that Eagle-Eye Yorkup's luck had run its course at last. The Phantom's single bullet had struck Yorkup in the heart, killing him instantly.

The driver's senses faded out then, merciful unconsciousness denying him a look at the lone ambusher.

Sun rays winked off silver conchas on the Phantom's velveteen *pantalones* as the outlaw climbed aboard the Hogan & Mulkey mudwagon and set to work with leisurely precision. Grunting with exertion, the killer tossed a dozen crates of golden ingots off into the roadside weeds.

HIS agate-brown eyes glinting exultantly above the bright green scarf which masked his features, the Phantom Forty-Niner straddled the gory figures

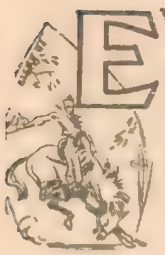
slumped in the front end of the hoodless wagon, picked up the lines and sawed the team around. He backed the heavy vehicle dexterously and headed the team back in the direction of Lodefork.

Tying the lines to the whipstock, the outlaw leaped to the ground, his silver-mounted spurs jingling musically. He lashed the wheelers' rumps with the Spanish quirt thonged to his wrist and watched the team spring into a gallop, hauling the now empty Conestoga back toward the mining camp beyond the divide.

Then, ignoring the pile of bullion crates he had dumped by the roadside, the Phantom Forty-Niner climbed the cutbank and recovered his Winchester from the hollow stalk of cactus. It had taken him most of the night to excavate the pot-hole in which he had crouched, camouflaged by the tuft of *ocotillo*. But the ingenious ruse had paid off. The bullion loot was almost secondary to the triumph of having bested Eagle-Eye Yorkup.

CHAPTER II

Tumbleweed Cowpoke



EVEN before the clattering wagon came in sight, Wayne Morgan knew he was in the path of a runaway team. Only a fool would drive at such breakneck speed down the dizzy switchbacks of Tinspout Pass.

Tall and lean in the high-horned stock saddle, Morgan barely had time to rein his hammerhead roan off the ruts when a six-horse team rocketed around a tight bend of the road behind him, the open-topped Conestoga nearly capsizing as its seven-foot hind wheels left the ruts.

As the wagon shot past the spot where he had reined up, the lone cowboy had a fleeting glimpse of two blood-spattered men slumped in front of the empty seat.

Without conscious volition, Morgan touched his roan with steel, sending the horse off the stage road and heading down the Thundergust slope toward the next lower level of the road. Unless the driverless wagon upset at the next switchback, he would be in a position to head off the stampeding animals.

By a miracle the wagon kept to the road and was bearing down on the solitary rider as Morgan skidded his roan down the shale bank. Reining in the direction of the runaway team, Morgan spurred alongside the frothing lead horses and leaned from stirrups, reaching down to seize a bit ring.

Fifty yards and he had slowed the panicked team to a trot, fighting the lead horse into submission with a range rider's skill. Dust swirled in thick whorls about the lean rider as he pulled the runaways to a halt at the entrance of the next hairpin switchback.

The lathered team had spent its panic and Morgan swung out of saddle without making any move to snub the horses down. His primary concern of the moment was the two lead-butchered men in the Conestoga box.

Climbing up over the front wheel, the cowboy gasped with the sick horror of what he saw. At first glance, both men appeared to be dead. One, a rawboned oldster in a brush-popper jumper and patched levis, had a bullet-hole punched over his heart. The other was mortally wounded, the target of a double charge of buckshot from the Remington shotgun on which he lay.

Then, incredibly, the buckshot-butchered man opened his eyes to stare at Wayne Morgan.

The panic in Cal Stagg's pain-shot orbs subsided as he saw that this was not the fabled ghost of Joaquin Murietta. No Mexican, this ruggedly handsome stranger was as deeply tanned as one, but his grave blue eyes had the sheen of polished gunmetal, and the thick hair under his tilted-back John B. was black.

In place of gaudy serape and gaucho jacket and green mask, the cowboy straddling the Conestoga box wore conventional range garb—blue hickory shirt, scuffed bullhide chaps, shop-made Justin cowboots. Two walnut-butted Colt .45s were holstered at his flanks, the sun bright on the shells studding his belts.

"Who done this, *amigo*?" Morgan asked. "Can you talk?"

Cal Stagg heard the stranger's query as if from a remote distance. His throat worked spasmodically and when he found his voice, it was a crow's caw, scarcely human.

"I think . . . Phantom Forty-Niner . . . Yorkup's scattergun . . . plugged me . . . by accident. Tell Sheriff Stoneruff . . . in Lodefork . . . to look for a . . . cactus with cut roots . . . Phantom's trick."

Stagg's raucous, gasping whisper trailed

Dimly under the Arizona stars Morgan and Blue Hawk saw Hogan stagger under the impact of a slug (CHAP. XI)

off, and Wayne Morgan realized that death could not be far off for the man.

Although he was a stranger in this part of Arizona, Wayne Morgan had heard rumors that the mysterious Phantom Forty-Niner of California was on the prowl again, after a hiatus of years. The waddy hesitated, debating whether to ride over the divide to locate the scene of the Phantom's wanton slaughter. It was obvious that the ambush had happened recently.

Then he decided that his first duty was to this dying man. The mining camp of Lodefork, according to signs Morgan had read at the summit, was less than an hour's drive down the west slope of the Thundergusts. This dying man obviously had some urgent message for the sheriff there. If he could live to explain his fate to the Lodefork lawman—

WHISTLING to his hammerhead roan, Morgan made the unconscious wagoneer as comfortable as he could on a pile of sacks in the Conestoga box. Then he climbed over the driver's seat and unwound the leather ribbons from the whipstock.

Morgan's cow pony followed in the dust as the waddy tooled the big freight wagon down the grades, one spike-heeled cowboot riding the foot brake almost constantly.

Lodefork was Morgan's destination. A wanted man himself, Wayne Morgan had no fear of visiting the Arizona mining camp in broad daylight. For the reward bounty posted for his capture was in the name of the famous "Masked Rider", Morgan's alter ego.

A sheriff's posse had driven the Masked Rider and his Yaqui Indian partner, Blue Hawk, into the Thundergust *malpais* two days ago. Even now, Blue Hawk and their extra horses were camped in a draw leading off Whetstone Canyon, almost astraddle the Arizona-Sonora boundary.

Lack of food and ammunition had prompted the Masked Rider to remove his disguise that morning and, in the rôle of a tumbleweed cowhand, head for the nearest settlement—Lodefork.

Wayne Morgan pulled up the team for a much needed rest when he reached the last foothill spur which gave him a view of the stamp mills and tarpaper-roofed shacks of Lodefork, down in the gulch below.

While waiting for the lather-flecked team to regain their wind, Morgan climbed back into the Conestoga box and knelt beside the buckshot-butchered figure of Cal Stagg.

One glance at the driver's staring, sightless eyes told the waddy that Death had won the race to Lodefork. Somewhere on the heat-shimmering slope of Tinspout Pass, the man's spark of life had ebbed and finally extinguished itself.

Fifteen minutes later Morgan drove the plodding team down Lodefork's single street, past the unpainted shaft-houses of the Golderado Cooperative Syndicate mines, past a Wells-Fargo stage station and a motley assortment of false-fronted saloons, livery stables, corrals and store buildings.

Jackleg miners and painted honkatonk girls stared at the dusty wagon, the high cleated box preventing them from seeing the gruesome corpses which comprised the Conestoga's freight.

Morgan halted the wagon in front of a squat brick building which bore a sign reading:

BORDER COUNTY JAIL
Kaw Stoneruff, Sheriff

A pot-bellied man with a three-day growth of rusty stubble on his jowls emerged from the sheriff's office as Morgan was hitching the team to a tie-rack. A tin star glinted on one of the man's gallus straps.

"Sheriff Stoneruff?" Morgan inquired, swatting dust from his cleft-crown Stetson.

The lawman shook his head, staring past the cowboy to size up the dust-covered mudwagon.

"The sheriff's out with a posse—Overland Telegraph says the Masked Rider and his Injun pard are somewhere in the mountains yonder," he grunted. "I'm Jim Krain, his deputy."

Krain set foot on a wagon hub and swung himself up to stare into the wagon box. Knots of muscle swelled on his unshaven jaws as he lowered himself off the wagon wheel and turned to face Morgan. The deputy was badly shaken by the grisly sight.

"Cal Stagg an' Eagle-Eye Yorkup—deader'n ticks in a bucket o' sheep dip," wheezed the fat deputy. "What's the lowdown, stranger? What become of the bullion they were haulin'?"

A crowd of gun-hung, sombreroed

miners and townsmen gathered in front of the jail as Wayne Morgan recounted briefly how he had stopped the runaway team, finding Yorkup dead with a bullet in his heart and the driver alive but sinking fast.

"The Phantom Forty-Niner, eh?" growled a towering, black-mustached man who had elbowed his way alongside Wayne Morgan. "Here the sheriff's out on some wild-goose chase after this Masked Rider hombre, and lets the Phantom clean out the third bullion shipment in a row!"

Deputy Jim Krain flushed under the big man's anger.

"Now hold on, Tol Hogan!" expostulated the deputy. "How was the sheriff to know that the Phantom would risk tanglin' horns with Eagle-Eye Yorkup? Danged if I don't believe he *is* Joaquin Murietta's ghost. No livin' man could notch his gunsights on old Eagle-Eye and live to rob his wagon."

MORGAN'S glance ranged over to the Conestoga, noting the big yellow letters which were dimly visible under the coating of alkali dust on the wagon box: HOGAN & MULKEY FREIGHT LINES. The black-mustached giant, then, was one of the freight bosses who owned the wagon.

Tol Hogan's beefy shoulders slumped as he climbed up in the wagon for a brief examination of the dead men. His face was ashen with despair when he alighted from the Conestoga.

"One thing's certain, anyhow," groaned the freighter. "The Phantom has whipped Hogan & Mulkey. And bankrupted the Golderado Coop at the same time. Which means that Lodefork's headed toward bein' a ghost town. Every independent miner in this gulch had a stake in that bullion the Phantom choused!"

News of the Tinspout Pass hold-up had sped the length and breadth of Lodefork, drawing a morbid throng from the camp's gambling halls and saloons to pack the street in front of the county jail from curb to curb.

A growing sense of anxiety plucked at Wayne Morgan's nerves. Despite the rôle he had played in bringing back the news of the Phantom's latest outrage, the rugged young rider felt apart from the tragedy. Of keener interest to him was the news the deputy sheriff had given him concerning the reason for Sheriff Stoneruff's absence from town. Word from a county seat north of Lodefork had arrived by telegraph to tip off the lawman concerning the Masked Rider's arrival in the Thundergusts.

With Stoneruff combing the badlands with a posse, Morgan knew that his Indian partner, Blue Hawk, might even now be in danger. In an emergency, he knew that Blue Hawk could probably outwit the Lodefork posse if they got too close to their hideout in Whetstone Canyon, and could easily slip south of the Border into the wastelands of Old Mexico.

But Blue Hawk was short of food and ammunition, as a result of their month-long trek out of central Arizona with one sheriff after another dogging their back trail. It was a desperate necessity that Wayne Morgan make his purchases and get out of town as speedily as possible.

Yet a hasty getaway now would be less than prudent. He was a marked man, stranger though he was; the target for all eyes as late comers had Morgan pointed out to them as the waddy who had driven the ill-fated Hogan & Mulkey bullion wagon back to Lodefork.

Morgan was edging his way toward his roan saddle horse when Deputy Jim Krain blocked him off.

"Stick around, stranger," the deputy ordered him gruffly. "I'll want yuh to tell the sheriff what it was that Cal Stagg told yuh—that business about lookin' for a cactus with cut roots. And Kaw Stoneruff may want yuh to take him back up the Spout to where yuh stopped the team."

Morgan nodded gravely, his eyes giving no hint of the strain that gripped his being.

"I'll drop around to yore office after the excitement has died down, Krain," he promised.

A funereal-looking man in the black broadcloth coat of an undertaker arrived with a pair of wicker baskets into which the dead bodies of the Phantom Forty-Niner's victims were loaded for transfer to the coroner's morgue.

Morgan, turning down numerous invitations to visit a local saloon and have a drink, found himself following the dejected figure of Tol Hogan as the big freighter crossed the street and walked up the steps of a ramshackle, barnlike building labeled:

HOGAN & MULKEY FREIGHT LINES

Hogan turned in the act of closing the door of his office, starting slightly as he recognized the tall, whippy-built cowboy who had followed him from the jail.

"Come in, bucko," Hogan said heavily. "I owned that wagon you drove into town. I'd like to pay you somethin' for the favor."

CHAPTER III

Suicide Assignment

WAYNE MORGAN sank gratefully into a calfhide chair, glad for the opportunity to get away from the morbid throng outside. After introducing himself, he waved off Tol Hogan's offer of a twenty-dollar gold piece.

"I'm glad I was able to stop yore team before it wrecked the wagon for yuh, Mr. Hogan," Morgan said. "From what I heard yuh tell the deputy, this hold-up today was a pretty serious thing for Lodefork as well as yore freightin' outfit?"

Tol Hogan slumped into a swivel chair beside his littered desk and let his big body go slack. Despair was limned in the freighter's craggy face as he stared at the cowpuncher.

"It bankrupts me and my partner, Fergus Mulkey," Hogan acknowledged. "What galls me personally is that it means Dutch Von Bemmel has the whip hand over me now. What business the minin' syndicate has left will go to Von Bemmel now."

Morgan's brows arched inquiringly, as he built himself a cigarette. Until he had waited out the sheriff's return, he welcomed an opportunity to make the time pass.

"Dutch Von Bemmel," Hogan explained, "owns the rival freightin' outfit here in Lodefork. He uses an armored wagon to transport bullion over the divide. Even the Phantom Forty-Niner couldn't rob his wagons. Even if Von Bemmel's teams were shot dead in the traces, his wagoneers could fort up in the wagon and hold off a siege."

Footsteps sounded on the porch outside and Morgan glanced up in time to see the door open to admit a slim, athletic girl of around twenty. One glance at her raven-black hair and clear blue eyes told Morgan that the girl was related to Tol Hogan. Her first words confirmed this.

"Oh, Dad, I just heard what happened to our shipment—and to poor old Cal and Eagle-Eye!"

She hurried across the room to put her arms around old Tol's neck, kissing him tenderly on a weathered cheek.

"This means we lose our contract with Golderado, Dad?" the girl asked anxiously. "Does it mean—" she broke off, catching sight of the strange cowboy who was firing his cigarette over by the window.

"My daughter Angie—this is Wayne Morgan," Tol Hogan said. "This is the buckaroo who brought our wagon back from the Pass, Angie."

Wayne Morgan doffed his sombrero, his eyes meeting Angie Hogan's level gaze. She was dressed in a gray ribbed bodice and skirt, and a pert little aigrette-feathered hat was pinned over the rich coils of black hair which framed her face. Taffy-colored riding boots were visible under the split riding skirt, and a quirt was dangling from her left wrist by a pleated thong.

"If yuh have a contract to haul the syndicate's bullion," Morgan said, bridging the awkward silence which fell between them, "a hold-up shouldn't alter it, Mr. Hogan. The minin' company knows the risk it takes when it consigns bullion to a public carrier."

Angie Hogan shook her head, exposing even white teeth in a smile which belied the heaviness that gripped her heart.

"You don't understand, Mr. Morgan," she said gravely. "The Golderado is a co-operative outfit. All the small miners own shares in it, pooling their output at the stamp mill. The Golderado is operating on a shoestring as it is. Today's hold-up will mean Golderado will be forced into receivership—and that means that the big Allied Arizona combine will be able to buy out every producing claim in Lodefork. And with Allied's board of directors running things from New York, it means that outside muckers will move in and crowd out hundreds of our miners and deprive them of their only means of supporting their families."

The earnestness of the girl's demeanor struck a responsive chord in Wayne Morgan's being. Years ago, as the Masked Rider, he had pledged himself to the Robin Hood rôle of helping the downtrodden and oppressed peoples of the West, wherever he found them suffering under a tyranny of any kind. Here in Lodefork such a sit-

uation was shaping up, an entire community threatened under the crushing heel of a ruthless Eastern corporation.

"Yuh haven't lost that contract yet, Miss Hogan," Morgan reminded the girl. "Of course I don't know the details of yore trouble, but if Lodefork's salvation depends on the safe transport of bullion to railhead, it seems—"

MORGAN was interrupted by the door slamming open without the formality of a knock. Framed on the threshold of the freight office was a whippy-built, middle-aged man dressed in checkered shirt and miner's high-laced boots. He was accompanied by a scar-faced Mexican, obviously a bodyguard of some sort.

"You and Cabral can close the door on yore way out, Dutch!" Hogan snarled, rearing to his feet and purpling apoplectically. "I'm in no mood to take yore gloatin' lip, understand?"

"Dutch" Von Bemmel came inside, leaving the Mexican gunhawk on the porch outside. His knife-blade lips pealed back off a row of snaggy, tobacco-stained teeth as he eased the door shut.

"Now close-hobble that temper of yore'n, Tol!" chuckled the owner of Hogan's rival freighting line. "I didn't come to crow about what happened to Cal Stagg and poor old Yorkup this mornin'. Where the Phantom's concerned, it coulda happened to me. I don't wish that luck on a yella dog. I thought I'd drop around to make yuh a cash offer for yore business."

Morgan, unnoticed in the background, sensed the hostility which lay between these two oddly contrasted men. He saw Hogan's scarred hand drop to the butt of the big Smith & Wesson revolver belted under his coat, saw Angie link her arm through her father's and clamp a slim, bronzed hand over Tol Hogan's wrist.

"Get out!" thundered Hogan, his black mustache bristling. "I'm not interested in any of yore deals, Dutch!"

Von Bemmel shrugged bony shoulders, folding his arms complacently and leaning against the door.

"Yuh're washed up in Lodefork after what happened today, Tol, and yuh know it," he taunted. "Yuh've lost all your drivers, now that Cal Stagg's dead. Even if Golderado's superintendent happens to be sweet on yore daughter, I got my doubts if Del Harmon would dare assign yuh any more bullion. Eagle-Eye York-

Wayne Morgan felt the trap-door drop, then he was plummeting downward at rope's end (CHAP. IX)

up's murder finishes yuh for keeps, Tol. Yuh'd be wise to let me buy yuh out, and salvage what yuh can."

Tod Hogan sagged back into his chair, burying his face in his hands. Wayne Morgan shook his head grimly, reading in Hogan's dejection the mark of an utterly licked man.

"I'll hire other drivers for the Tinspout run—even if I have to run down the Phantom by myself," Hogan panted. "I'd see Hogan and Mulkey's rollin' stock in hell before I'd sell out to you, Dutch. Yuh're a tool of Arizona Allied and don't think this town don't know it!"

Dutch Von Bemmel drew a stogie from his shirt pocket and rolled it between his drooping lips.

"Where," demanded the rival freight boss, "would yuh find a driver willin' to climb aboard one of yore suicide wagons, Tol? A freight business can't operate at a profit without a crew of drivers. And my Thundergust Freight Line, even if it is subsidized by Arizona Allied like yuh say, has got every driver in Border County sewed up tight."

Hogan wilted under the impact of Von Bemmel's words. Raw defeat glazed his eyes as he looked up to meet his competitor's leer.

"Just a minute, Von Bemmel." It was Wayne Morgan who broke the steely silence of the office. "Yuh're wrong. I'm one experienced driver yuh haven't signed up yet. And it so happens that Tol Hogan here has hired me to take the next Golderado bullion shipment to Sacatone!"

Von Bemmel whirled, his agate-brown eyes blazing as he caught sight of the handsome young stranger for the first time.

"Who're you?" he demanded. "Thundergust Freight can top any offer Hogan give yuh an' double it!"

Morgan's rope-callused hand dropped from his cigarette, thumb-hooked over a shell belt, fingers poised above the walnut butt of a Colt .45.

"Who I am is none of yore business, Von Bemmel. I'm givin' yuh a count of five to get out of this office before I heave yuh out on yore noggin."

Dutch Von Bemmel's cigar dropped from his sagging mouth as he backed away from the menace in the cowboy's slitted eyes. Bony hand atremble, the freighter reached for the doorknob, turning to glare at Tol Hogan.

"If the Phantom can't run yuh out of business, I can!" he snarled venomously. "Don't think hirin' a gunslick will buffalo me, Tol. If yuh want to play rough—Thundergust will copper yore bet!"

THE clapboard wall shook as Von Bemmel slammed the door and stalked down the street, accompanied by the gun-hung Cabral.

Wayne Morgan turned to see Angie and her father staring at him, relief and panic in their eyes.

"Thanks, Morgan," said the freighter. "Yuh rid my office of plumb bad rubbish." He sighed heavily, patting his daughter's hand. "But I'm afraid Dutch called the cards right. Without drivers, Hogan and Mulkey are licked."

Morgan came forward, halting in front of Tol Hogan.

"But I meant what I told Von Bemmel just now. I—I'm a tumbleweed cowhand looking for a spread where I can lease my lass'-rope. But I can drive yore bullion wagons for yuh."

Hogan licked his lips, a grin twitching at his mouth. Then he shook his head.

"I'm much obliged, Morgan," he said, "but there's Golderado to consider. Del Harmon—he's the production super over at the stampmill—wouldn't cotton to me entrustin' a fortune in bullion to a stranger. For all I know, Harmon might ask me how I know yuh ain't the Phantom Forty-Niner."

Morgan hesitated. Then, as if coming to a decision, he stepped over to Hogan's desk, found a pencil and paper, and scribbled off a list of names and addresses.

"Here," he said, handing the paper to Morgan, "are bankers and ranch owners and other responsible citizens who know me. Yuh've got an Overland Telegraph office here in Lodefork. Get busy and wire these men. Their recommendations will testify to my character."

Hogan stared at the list, scowling dubiously. Morgan had written down the names of well-known citizens in half a dozen Western states, all of whom had been helped at one time or another in the past by Wayne Morgan or his alter ego, the Masked Rider.

"Do it, Dad!" Angie said eagerly. "It won't hurt to telegraph these men. See—there's the governor of New Mexico, even! If their testimonials are satisfactory, the syndicate couldn't object to your hiring Mr. Morgan, even if he is a total stranger."

Hogan got to his feet, his eyes losing

their troubled look for the first time in months. He thrust out a hand and shook Morgan's impulsively.

"I'll get the wires off *pronto prontico,*" he said. "We'll have answers by tomorrow or the day after. Meantime yuh can bunk at the Lucky Nugget Hotel down the street, Morgan—at my expense."

On their way out of the Hogan & Mulkey office, the grizzled old freighter's face lost some of its vitality.

"Yuh understand what yuh're takin' on, don't yuh, Morgan?" Hogan inquired anxiously. "I got my doubts if Sheriff Stoneruff ever dabs his loop on this Phantom. Besides which the rumor's out that the Masked Rider is in this territory. From what I hear, the Masked Rider might be a worse threat than this Phantom."

Wayne Morgan laughed, the motive for his humor lost to the anxious-eyed freighter at his side.

"I've also heard it said," Morgan commented, "that the Masked Rider is a sort of Robin Hood outlaw who helps the underdog every chance he gets . . . Shore, I know what I'm up against, Hogan. But if the existence of Lodefork depends on Hogan and Mulkey holdin' on to their Golderado contract for haulin' bullion, I'm game to risk it!"

CHAPTER IV

Blue Hawk's Camp

LEAVING Hogan at the entrance to the Overland Telegraph shack, Morgan headed down the street, ostensibly on his way to the Lucky Nugget Hotel to book lodgings.

Instead, he turned in at the jail office, intending to inform Jim Krain of his new job with the Hogan & Mulkey outfit. But the jail was locked, and a note tacked to the door informed Morgan that the deputy sheriff had left for Tinspout Pass to investigate the scene of the Phantom Forty-Niner's hold-up.

Morgan grinned with relief. Krain's absence released him from his pledge to remain in Lodefork until the sheriff's return. He headed immediately for a mercantile store and bought a gunny sack full of bacon, flour, coffee and sugar, together with a plentiful supply of cartridges in .45 and .30-30 calibers.

Returning to the jailhouse, Morgan found his hammerhead roan waiting, ground-tied in front of the hitchrack. The ill-fated Hogan & Mulkey bullion wagon had been removed to the freight company's yards across the street.

He was in the act of lashing his sack of provisions to his saddle cantle when Tol Hogan approached, accompanied by two young men of equal height and roughly the same age, somewhere in the early thirties.

"Morgan, this here's my partner, Fergus Mulkey, and this is the super of the Golderado Coop, Del Harmon. Gents, meet our new driver. I reckon he looks ringy enough to keep his loop on our haulin' contract, eh?"

Morgan appraised the two men as they exchanged hand shakes.

Fergus Mulkey was a handsome, slightly sporty-looking young fellow dressed in brown tweed coat and whipcord riding breeches. His close-clipped brown mustache was heavily pomaded, and his florid, clean-chiseled face was deeply tanned under the brim of his white John B.

Del Harmon, manager of the Golderado Syndicate, was a husky Nordic with straw-yellow hair and penetrating dark eyes. In contrast to Mulkey's swashbuckling comaraderie, Del Harmon was taciturn, almost shy as he met Wayne Morgan's glance.

"Glad to have you in the firm, Morgan." Fergus Mulkey grinned. "I hope you won't have cause to regret it. Of course, you understand Tol hasn't actually hired you until we get an answer to the wires he sent this afternoon."

Morgan nodded gravely, repressing a sudden feeling akin to dislike for Tol Hogan's debonair young junior partner.

"You'll have the whole camp's good luck behind you, for whatever that's worth, Morgan," Del Harmon commented. "If you fail to get our next bullion shipment across the Pass I'm afraid—I'm afraid the directors of Golderado will insist on voiding Hogan & Mulkey's contract. And that will be the same as selling out to Arizona Allied."

Angie Hogan appeared in the doorway of the office across the street and Harmon and Mulkey excused themselves hastily to cross over to where the girl waited.

"They're both sparkin' my daughter," Tol Hogan chuckled. "She can't make up her mind which one of them young blades she's in love with—my pardner or Del

Harmon. Leastwise, I'm fairly certain of not bein' father to an old maid."

After Hogan had left, Morgan mounted the roan and headed in the direction of the Lucky Nugget Hotel. He passed the rambling hostelry and left town by a side street, the westering sun in his eyes.

When he had put a ridge between him and the mining camp, Morgan reined southward toward the Thundergust divide and the Mexican border. Blue Hawk's camp was a good four hour's ride away, and he knew darkness would catch him well before he reached Whetstone Canyon.

As was usual when he was embarking on a Robin Hood campaign, Morgan felt exalted by a surge of feeling akin to exhilaration.

The issues were clear-cut: Lodefork's miners and their families were threatened by the pressure of a foreign syndicate waiting to take over their bankrupt cooperative organization. The Phantom Forty-Niner figured as a secondary, but vital link in Lodefork's sinister destiny. If the salvation of the Golderado depended on Hogan & Mulkey retaining the bullion-hauling contract, then the future of Lodefork hinged indirectly on the capture of the mysterious bandit.

As one of Hogan & Mulkey's wagoneers, Morgan knew he had placed himself in prime position to meet the Phantom, sooner or later. The fact that the outlaw always struck without warning and was as elusive as if he were, in fact, the resurrected ghost of the arch-killer, Joaquin Murietta, only served to accentuate Wayne Morgan's conviction that here was a job ideally suited for the talents of the equally mysterious Masked Rider. . . .

DARKNESS pooled in indigo waves between the looming granite scarps of Whetstone Canyon, flanking the unsurveyed miles of the Mexican boundary. Deep in a draw opening off the Whetstone gorge, Blue Hawk, the Yaqui, dined off the last cold food left to his saddle-bags.

A campfire was out of the question; Blue Hawk was fully aware of the danger of scouting possemen in the night. For the same reason he had not dared to bag the mountain goat his keen black eyes had spotted on a lofty crag that afternoon, for the sound of a gunshot would travel far in the rarefied mountain air, and might reach hostile ears.

He was a prime specimen of one of the Yaqui whom the Masked Rider had chosen as the inseparable *companero* of his danger trails. Of indeterminate age, Blue Hawk's rawhide-thewed body and craggy face were the deep copper hue of a tarnished penny. His eyes were like polished obsidian, matching the blue-black shade of the thick hair which depended in twin braids over his shoulders. A beaded bandeau girdled Blue Hawk's head, holding in place the single eagle feather which signified his tribal station.

Wearing white drill shirt and trousers, with a red sash at the waist and pliable doeskin moccasins laced ankle high, Blue Hawk carried no weapons other than the skinning knife sheathed under his sash. Yet the Yaqui was adept with pistol or carbine and he always carried a yew-wood hunting bow and a quiver of arrows when on the trail.

Concealed around a bend of the draw were Blue Hawk's *grulla* saddle horse and pinto pack animal, grazing with the magnificent black stallion named Midnight which his partner always rode when in the rôle of the Masked Rider.

A faint crunch of steel-shod hoofs on rubble reached Blue Hawk's acutely tuned ears as he was in the act of spreading a blue army blanket in the shelter of the cliffs. Instantly, the Indian's senses alerted. A horseman was approaching their secret camp from the direction of Whetstone Canyon. It might well be Wayne Morgan, returning from Lodefork with supplies.

But why was his partner approaching by way of the main canyon, thereby leaving tracks for some alert sheriff to discover and guide the law to their hideout? When he had left camp before dawn that morning, Morgan had agreed to return from the Mexican side of the Thundergusts, entering the draw which they had selected because of its small cold water spring as a place to hide out and rest for a few days.

Picking up his hunting bow and a buckskin quiver of iron-tipped arrows, Blue Hawk slipped noiselessly down the rock-ribbed defile, out into the shadow-clotted gulf of the Whetstone.

He no longer heard the faint sound of hoofbeats being amplified by the natural sounding boards of the gorge walls, but instinct told Blue Hawk that peril was abroad in the night. Silently as a cougar in the darkness, the Yaqui slithered down the rocky bed of the dry canyon, prefer-

ring to meet danger well away from their camp if a showdown came.

He was a good hundred yards down-canyon from the mouth of the side draw when a full moon slid its argentine disk over the rim-rock, flooding the canyon with a spectral glow. As far as Blue Hawk's keen gaze could penetrate, the canyon seemed empty. But to his sensitive nostrils came the faint odor of tobacco smoke and horseflesh.

The Yaqui moved into a motte of dry juniper brush to avoid the open moonlight. Off across the canyon, a *chacalaca* bird burst suddenly from its nest in a *maguay* clump and winged off into the night, shrilling its startled cry.

Something had frightened the Mexican bird over in those rocks. Blue Hawk felt the menace which charged the night and he nocked an arrow to his bowstring, eyes probing the shadow-filled pockets of the canyon.

He was moving stealthily around the bosque of juniper when the lariat noose dropped over his shoulders without warning, pinning his arms to his sides. Before Blue Hawk's fist could grasp the haft of the knife in his belt, he felt the reata go taut and he was dragged off his feet, bruising his skull on a lava outcrop. Stunned and bleeding, the Yaqui sagged limply inside the tight noose, momentarily helpless.

AN EXULTANT cry sounded from a ledge above him and instantly the canyon seemed to come alive with chaps-clad, gun-toting white men. Blue Hawk found himself being dragged out into the open moonlight by two burly opponents who had leaped down from the ledge overhead.

"It's the Masked Rider's Injun pardner!" called the sombreroed posseman who had roped the prisoner. "I'd stake my last blue chip on that, Sheriff! Blue Hawk —ain't that the name the sheriff wired yuh from Trigo Frio last week?"

Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff emerged from the tangle of boulders where his crawling body had startled the *chacalaca* bird out of its nesting place. His seamy face gaunt from better than two days in the saddle, the Lodefork lawman was grinning now.

"Fits the description, Pete," Stoneruff acknowledged, sizing up the panting Indian from moccasins to head feather. "Accordin' to the Trigo Frio sheriff, where Blue Hawk is yuh're apt to find the Masked Rider himself somewheres close."

Stoneruff pulled a long-barreled Frontier Colt from the holster at his thigh and reamed the muzzle sight-deep in the hard flesh of Blue Hawk's stomach.

"I'm givin' yuh yore choice of makin' *habla* or takin' a slug in the middle, Blue Hawk!" snarled the sheriff, earing the gunhammer to full cock. "Where's the Masked Rider holed up?"

The Yaqui's head was clearing now. He was hopelessly out-numbered by the sheriff's posse. It was obvious that Stoneruff had left his horses further down the canyon and had been combing every inch of the Whetstone for a trace of the Masked Rider's camp.

"Masked Rider sleep um in camp," Blue Hawk said sullenly, lapsing into the crude pidgin English which belied the education Blue Hawk had received at a mission school in his youth.

Stoneruff's mouth widened in a grin under his sandy waterfall mustache. For the sheriff, this capture meant the end of a long and grueling manhunt.

"Where's yore camp?" he asked harshly, twisting the gun barrel against Blue

[*Turn page*]

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(Adv.)

Hawk's shirt. "Talk fast, redskin, and if yuh try any lies I'll scalp yuh alive!"

Blue Hawk gestured vaguely down the canyon, away from the draw he had left a few minutes before.

"One, maybe two miles to north," the Yaqui mumbled. "I go to hunt um mountain goat, get caught by dark."

Kaw Stoneruff pulled back his gun and turned to his saddle-weary men, who were crowded about in a tense group.

"The Masked Rider must have crawled back in that brushy *barranca* where it was too dark for us to look for sign, men," the Lodefork sheriff said wearily. "We'll head back there on foot, takin' the Injun with us."

Whipping out a bandanna, Stoneruff knotted the cloth around Blue Hawk's mouth to prevent the Indian from making an outcry to warn his partner.

"Lead the way, Blue Hawk!" ordered the sheriff. "If yuh're trickin' us, yuh won't be alive by sunup. Remember that!"

CHAPTER V

Phantom Clues

FEIGNING utter despair, the Yaqui plodded down the canyon, surrounded by his captors. Fifty yards from the spot where he had been captured, Blue Hawk caught sight of a group of saddle horses picketed under the overhang of the granite cliffs.

"This'll make yuh the most famous sheriff in the Territory, Kaw!" chuckled a posseman in a hoarse whisper. "The Masked Rider's slipped out of every trap that's been laid for him yet."

Kaw Stoneruff grunted skeptically.

"We ain't dabbed out twine on that slippery devil yet," he reminded the possemen. "I'll believe it when Blue Hawk has led us to the Masked Rider's camp. And remember, men—if he ain't sleepin' when we show up, shoot to kill. We can't take any chances."

They skirted the massed horses and moved on down the rocky bed of the Whetstone, following a curve of the gorge where the moon's rays could not penetrate.

Blue Hawk and his captors were just emerging from the long stretch of Stygian shadow when a sudden thunder of hoofbeats reached their ears, from somewhere behind them. A moment later the Lodefork posse found themselves caught flat-footed in the path of a stampede, as their saddle horses raced out into the moonlight with bridle reins flying.

Blue Hawk found himself being dragged out of the way as Stoneruff and his deputies leaped out of the path of hammering hoofs. Before a single rider could snatch at a passing mount, the stampeding horses had bolted past them, hoofs striking sparks from the rubble.

With a hoarse yell of dismay, Stoneruff leaped out into the swirling dust to stare back up the canyon.

"Somebody turned them broncs loose!" snarled the sheriff. "Take cover!"

Before the dumfounded possemen could move, they caught sight of a horse and rider moving out of the blot of shadow, silhouetted like something carved out of ebony against the moon-gilded cliff.

"The Masked Rider!"

Kaw Stoneruff choked out the name like a man in a trance, as he caught sight of the Winchester which the horseman was weaving over the petrified ranks of his posse.

The Masked Rider halted his magnificent coal-black stallion a dozen yards away, his .30-30 covering the sheriff. Moonlight revealed the black domino mask under the curving black brim of the Robin Hood outlaw's Stetson, and a vagrant wind ruffled the black cape which bannered from his shoulders.

"Get yore hands up!" The Masked Rider's warning was low-voiced, impelling. It was followed by the oily click of his Winchester coming to full cock.

Stunned by the loss of their horses and by the outlaw's sudden appearance from behind them, Stoneruff and his deputized riders dropped their guns and flung their arms skyward.

With a grunt, Blue Hawk tugged his knife from scabbard and severed the lass'-rope which bound his arms. A moment later the Yaqui was out of the bayed circle of lawmen and heading swiftly to meet his pardner of the out-trails tugging off his gag.

"Head back to camp and wait for me, Hawk!" the Masked Rider's whisper reached Blue Hawk's ears. "I'll hold these hard-cases until I hear yuh signal."

"It is good, Senor." The only name the Yaqui had for the Masked Rider was "Senor."

Blue Hawk vanished into the shadows.

The masked man swung his Winchester suddenly to the left and flame spat from the muzzle. A deputy sheriff who, thinking his movement was masked by the sheriff's body, had a six-gun half out of leather, hastily raised his arms as a steel-jacketed bullet fanned his cheek and ricocheted off down the canyon.

"Yuh can round up yore hosses at the bottom end of the Whetstone, gents!" called the Masked Rider, levering a fresh shell into the breech of his saddle gun. "When yuh've done that, yuh might take a *pasear* over Tinspout Pass way. The Phantom Forty-Niner held up a bullion wagon this mornin' and killed the driver and Eagle-Eye Yorkup."

Helpless under the gun-drop of the cool-voiced rider, Kaw Stoneruff and his men backed down the trail, turned and headed in dejected single file down the moonlit gorge, keeping their arms elevated until they were out of range.

When they turned, it was to see the Masked Rider curvette his black stallion on the trail and vanish like a wraith into the sheltering gloom. . . .

BLUE HAWK was waiting with the horses at their camp when the Masked Rider reined Midnight into the side gully. Along with the pack horse and the Yaqui's gray saddler was the hammerhead roan which the Masked Rider used when traveling in the guise of Wayne Morgan.

"I was very stupid to fall into a trap, Senor," said Blue Hawk.

The Masked Rider grinned, thrusting his .30-30 into its scabbard under the saddle fender.

"No matter," he chuckled. "I was delayed gettin' back, Hawk. All that counts is that I reached camp in time."

Blue Hawk's impassive features gave no hint of the gratitude he felt toward his mysterious companion. A world of loyalty and brotherly affection had gone into the single word "Senor".

Who the Masked Rider had been before he hit the owlhoot was as much a mystery to Blue Hawk as it was to uncounted sheriffs throughout the West who had tried, but never succeeded, in corraling the elusive Robin Hood outlaw. But whatever his past, Blue Hawk and the Masked Rider enjoyed a rapport which had grown into a welded bond of fellowship in the years they had shared the dangerous existence of hunted men together.

"We're headin' for Tinspout Pass, Hawk," the Masked Rider answered Blue Hawk's unvoiced query. "It isn't likely our friend the sheriff will have a hoss under him before sunrise. In the meantime, we have work to do, in addition to shiftin' our camp to safer territory."

As they followed Whetstone Canyon deeper into the Thundergusts, their spare horses trailing behind without benefit of lead ropes, the masked man outlined briefly the drama he had witnessed during the day.

"Lodefork is dependin' on us, Hawk," the mystery rider concluded. "I think this Phantom Forty-Niner is too much for the sheriff to handle. That's why I aim to investigate the clue that Cal Stagg gave me with his dyin' breath—this riddle of the cactus with the cut roots. It must have some bearin' on how the Phantom was able to pull off that bullion robbery."

Dawn found the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk making a dry camp at the summit of Tinspout Pass, a mile off the stage road which linked Sacatone's railhead with the mining camp at Lodefork.

Breakfasting on the provisions which the Masked Rider had purchased in town, the Masked Rider sized up the camp site they had selected in a craterlike depression atop a lofty cinder cone overlooking Tinspout Pass. He decided that it would be safe for them to get a much-needed sleep.

The sun had crawled to the zenith when the two men awoke, immeasurably refreshed. The same topic was in the Masked Rider's mind that had been there when he had fallen asleep.

"The Phantom Forty-Niner stole twelve heavy crates of bullion from Stagg's wagon at a point less than a mile from here, Hawk," he commented when they had eaten, and he was cinching a kak on Midnight. "That's not too cold a trail to pick up, even if legend has it that the Phantom is a ghost who leaves no tracks. I figger that not even a spook can haul a wagonload of gold ingots far without leavin' some clue behind."

They headed down the slope of the cinder cone with the sun at their backs, keeping a sharp eye on the barren terrain in the event that Deputy Jim Krain was still investigating the scene of the hold-up.

Reaching the stage road, the Masked Rider pointed out the easily-defined

tracks of the runaway wagon, on the east side of the divide. They had followed the wagon tracks less than a mile down the grade when they located the spot where the wagon had been turned around.

"Here's where Eagle-Eye Yorkup was ambushed," the Masked Rider explained. "And I see that the deputy sheriff located this spot yesterday afternoon, so don't pay any attention to that set of hoof prints yonder."

The imprint of the twelve bullion cases was plain to see in the crushed *ignota* weeds alongside the road. The marks of high-heeled boots, which the Masked Rider took to be Deputy Sheriff Jim Krain's, had partially obliterated the prints left by several sets of miners' hob-nailed boots.

BLUE HAWK, reading sign with the skill of his breed, looked up from his examination of the ambush site with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Mules, Senor. The Phantom loaded the bullion crates on pack mules, *si*."

The Masked Rider nodded. Leaving the Yaqui to examine the terrain to determine the direction taken by the Phantom Forty-Niner's pack train, he climbed up on the cutbank and surveyed the surrounding territory within an arc covered by an average rifle.

He was recalling Cal Stagg's dying words, the message which the driver had begged Wayne Morgan to deliver to the sheriff in Lodefork: "Tell Sheriff Stoneruff . . . look for cactus with cut roots."

Within the range of his vision, the Masked Rider could count less than half a dozen clumps of Spanish bayonet, *maguay* and prickly pear.

Then, almost at his feet, he saw a clump of dead *ocotillo* growing beside a slab of bubble-pitted red lava.

Stooping, the Masked Rider tugged at the central stalk of the candleweed bush. He was not surprised to find that the cactus had been cut at the roots and could be tossed aside. Revealed under the spiny growth was a hole spaded out of the flinty soil, roughly five feet deep and two feet in diameter.

Gouged marks on the side of the hole revealed where spur rowels had scratched the earth as the hidden ambusher climbed into and out of the hole. The rubble at the bottom of the hole was trampled with the outlines of spike-heeled cowboots.

Pursing his lips thoughtfully, the Masked Rider turned to see that Blue Hawk, mounted once more on his grulla, was heading off toward the north, crouched in saddle and riding in zigzag fashion across the barren slope.

"I wonder if Jim Krain discovered how the Phantom was able to kill Eagle-Eye Yorkup," the Masked Rider mused. Lifting a hollow stalk of cactus he sniffed the gunpowder which fouled its tip. "This ambush trap was worthy of Joaquin Murietta's ghost, at that!"

CHAPTER VI

Sealed Lips

SWINGING into stirrups, the Masked Rider urged Midnight into a gallop and quickly overtook his Indian partner.

Blue Hawk reined up, slid from stirrups and knelt to examine a vague scratch on a protruding layer of igneous rock.

"The mules went this way, Senor," the Yaqui commented, pointing northwesterly. "The Phantom has cached his stolen bullion at the end of this trail, no? Somewhere in a place where his mules have feed and water."

The Masked Rider's eyes slitted speculatively. Even his own highly-trained ability to follow a cold trail would have been taxed to the utmost in following the traces of a mule string's passage across this rocky slope, without so much as a coating of dust to hold a hoofprint. Following a cold trail was Blue Hawk's forte, a heritage from his savage ancestors.

"The Phantom has help, I reckon," the Masked Rider asserted. "Our first job is to trail this mule train—but I doubt if we locate the Phantom Forty-Niner at the end of this trail."

They pushed on into the rugged Thundergust *malpais*, putting Tinspout Pass out of sight over a series of corrugated ridges. Only occasionally did they cut any actual trail sign. When they did, it served to confirm their instinct for following the logical route a mule drover would choose.

Sundown found them ten miles from the scene of the bullion robbery, and both men knew that their tracking would be at an end with the coming of dusk.

Twilight was staining the Thundergusts into lavender etchings when they

struck a clearly defined spoor where the mules had been driven into a muddy creek which sluiced off the lofty crown of a volcanic height known as Snakefang Peak. That was a prominent landmark in this section of the Border country. The tracks did not emerge on the opposite bank of the stream.

"The Phantom's mules followed this creek to hide their back track, Hawk," the Masked Rider commented gravely. "Don't yuh reckon so?"

Blue Hawk rubbed his whiskerless jaw thoughtfully, his beady obsidian eyes scanning the edge of the stream for hoofprints.

"*Si*—but whether up or down stream is the question, Senor."

They decided to eat a cold supper from the supplies in their saddle-bags, holding a council of war while they devoured their meal.

Night had fallen by the time they finished, and they had devised a working plan.

"You scout this creek upstream, Hawk," the Masked Rider explained, "and I'll follow it downstream toward the river that flows past Lodefork. I'll meet yuh back at camp by dawn."

Blue Hawk nodded in the growing darkness.

"I will be there, Senor."

"On the other hand," the Masked Rider said, "Tol Hogan will have the answers to his telegram today and he'll wonder what happened to Wayne Morgan, his new driver. If I don't run across the Phantom's mule train tonight, I'll head on to Lodefork."

Saddle leather creaked as Blue Hawk swung astride his gray.

"You will want your roan and Senor Morgan's clothing," the Yaqui said. "Where should I bring them?"

The Masked Rider slipped a bridle over Midnight's ears and drew the buckle tight.

"There's an abandoned mine a mile due south of Lodefork," he said. "Bring the roan and my Wayne Morgan fixin's to the shafthouse and wait for me there. *Adios, amigo.*"

The night had swallowed up the mystery riders, both of them. Blue Hawk followed the creek upstream toward its source on the craggy slopes of the Snakefang while the Masked Rider reined to the southwest, following the creek toward its junction with the Whetstone River which met at the main forks where the mining camp was situated.

Moonrise was yet an hour away when the Masked Rider caught a scent of wood smoke in the chill night air. Someone had a mesquite fire going down the creek.

Confident that his black outfit and horse made him virtually invisible in the darkness, the Masked Rider rode close to the stream, trusting to the burbling waters to muffle the measured thud of Midnight's hoofs on the muddy bank.

THE creek at this point had entered a deep gully, its rim rocks overgrown with stunted buckbrush and salt cedar. Rounding a bend of the gully, the Masked Rider reined up as a glimmering campfire met his vision, on the opposite bank and less than fifty yards distant.

Stepping out of saddle, the masked man pulled Midnight into the shelter of a willow thicket and ground-tied the stallion. Then, loosening Colts in holsters, the Robin Hood outlaw waded the shallow stream and headed along the north bank toward the campfire.

The raucous bray of a mule broke the stillness, and beyond the ruby glow of firelight the Masked Rider caught sight of a half-dozen animals grazing on lush grama grass which carpeted a shelving bench leading to the edge of the creek.

"The Phantom's gold carriers," the Masked Rider whispered excitedly. "No prospector would have that many canaries!"

A lone man crossed and recrossed before the campfire, carrying chunks of mesquite to replenish the blaze. The Masked Rider worked his way to a boulder pile just outside the firelighted area and squatted down to scout the camp.

Fifteen minutes elapsed and brought no trace of any other human around the camp. The fireglow revealed the camper as a stocky-built man in his middle forties, wearing the red wool shirt, corduroy pants and warped boots of a jackleg miner. Yet this was not a prospector's camp; no Long Tom, cradle or sluice box was visible.

The camper brought a wooden box over beside the fire, set up a cracked mirror and took a razor from his shirt pocket. Then, working up a lather with a tin can of water he had boiling on the coals, the camper worked soapsuds into his beard and set about shaving by the uncertain glare of the campfire.

Palming his six-guns, the Masked Rider made a circuit of the camp so as to approach from the direction of the creek, striding into the firelight from the camper's rear.

The camper had made the first stroke of the razor down his hairy cheek when his attention was arrested by a harsh voice out of the night, rasping above the gurgle of the creek over its rocky channel:

"Hands up, Phantom Forty-Niner! I've got yuh covered."

The camper leaped to his feet and whirled, discarding his razor to stab a fist toward the gunstock curving from the thonged-down holster on his thigh.

Then the hand froze, as the camper found himself staring into the bore of a six-gun leveled at his midriff. The man's heavy-boned face drained of color as his gaze lifted to see his captor's black-masked face above the gun.

"Masked Rider!" he said hoarsely, pads of lather dripping from his chin. "Don't shoot, buskie. I don't aim to buck yore gun-swift."

The outlaw's hands groped to the level of his ears as the Robin Hood outlaw drew in closer, reaching out to lift the Colt .45 from its holster and toss it to one side.

"That's fine." The Masked Rider grinned. "You know who I am and I know who you are. Between us, Phantom, we're the most wanted hombres in Arizona Territory. Kaw Stoneruff would pawn his year's wages to drop in on our little pow-wow."

The camper had recovered from his shock, and a crooked grin took shape under his lather-dripping lips.

"I ain't the Phantom Forty-Niner, if that's what yuh're thinkin'," he grunted. "I'm prospectin'. This is my gold claim."

The Masked Rider's bleak eyes swung down to the box which served as the man's shaving table. Stenciled on the end of the crate were the words:

GOLDERADO COOPERATIVE SYNDICATE

"Yeah?" echoed the Robin Hood outlaw acidly. "If yuh're a prospector, how come yuh've got a bullion crate from Lodefork here in yore camp? Yuh don't smelt yore dust into gold bars before yuh turn it over to the syndicate, do yuh?"

The defiance drained from the man's body.

"I ain't talkin'," he grated sullenly.

The Masked Rider eared his gun hammer to full cock.

"Yuh'll tell me where yuh cached the bullion yuh robbed off of Hogan & Mulkey's wagon over in the Pass yesterday," he said grimly. "I trailed yore mule string here."

RAW horror glittered in the camper's eyes, but he shook his head doggedly.

"Go ahead and shoot," he rasped. "I ain't talkin'."

The Masked Rider paused, indecision in his eyes. He was beginning to doubt his luck. This surly, unkempt miner did not appear to be the type of man who would don a Joaquin Murietta costume and rob bullion shipments under the guise of the Phantom Forty-Niner.

"Mebbe yuh ain't the Phantom," the Masked Rider conceded, "but I'm taking yuh down to make *habla* with the sheriff in Lodefork tonight. Mebbe yuh can explain to him why yuh're grazin' a string of mules in this wild spot back of nowhere. Mebbe Kaw Stoneruff can find out where yuh got an empty bullion box."

The camper snorted his contempt.

"I can see the Masked Rider showin' up at a sheriff's office," he jibed. "Yuh're packin' a four-figger bounty on yore topknot, feller."

The Masked Rider shrugged. "Yuh've got a reata on yore saddle over yonder," he said. "Keep yore hands up and walk over there. I'll show yuh if I'm runnin' a bluff—if yuh don't want to tell me where yuh stashed that Golderado bullion."

In minutes the fuming miner was trussed hand and foot with his own lass'-rope and the Masked Rider, carrying a lantern which he had found beside the camper's bedroll, was making a survey of the camp.

Rock walls hemmed in the grassy bench and the earth showed no signs of where the syndicate treasure might have been buried. The Masked Rider, squinting at the glow on the skyline which told of a rising moon, returned to his prisoner with a steeldust gelding in tow.

Saddling the steelduster, the Masked Rider helped his prisoner into the stirrups, playing safe by roping the man to the saddle-horn. At his whistle signal, Midnight came trotting down the gully to nuzzle the Masked Rider's shoulder.

"I still think yuh're bluffin', Masked Rider," his captive jeered, as they headed across the creek in the direction of Lode-

fork. "I'm game to face the sheriff if you are. . . ."

It was well past midnight when the Masked Rider topped the ridge overlooking Lodefork and slanted down into the canyon, following the Tinspout Pass stage road. His prisoner rode at his stirrup, the steeldust gelding's hackamore rope dallied to Midnight's saddle-horn.

Several saloons on the main street blazed with light but the street itself was deserted as the Masked Rider reined up in front of the Border County jail. The sheriff's office was dark and deserted.

The Masked Rider rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. In all probability, Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff and his posse were still tracking down their scattered horses, in which case they would not show up in Lodefork until after daylight.

Across the street, lamplight glowed in the Hogan & Mulkey Freighting Line office. Obeying an impulse, the Masked Rider slanted across the wheel-rutted street and dismounted.

Untying his prisoner from the saddle-horn, the masked man ordered the man to dismount. Then, jabbing a six-gun in the camper's spine, he prodded him toward the door of Tol Hogan's office.

In response to his knock, the door opened and the beefy figure of Tol Hogan himself appeared on the threshold.

"Slim Jenson!" the freighter blurted, squinting at the roped figure standing on his porch. "Who in heck hogtied you like a cocoon?"

Before the prisoner could frame a reply, Tol Hogan's gaze swung around to catch sight of the Masked Rider.

Instinctively, the freighter reached toward the gun butt at his hip. Then he fell back a step, as the Robin Hood outlaw pushed his prisoner into the room, a Colt Peacemaker in either hand.

CHAPTER VII

Vanishing Prisoner

BLINKING in the glare of the Coleman lamp on Hogan's desk, the Masked Rider kicked the door shut. Glancing swiftly around the room, he caught sight of Fergus Mulkey seated at a desk, his coat draped over a chair and his sleeves rolled up while he worked at a paper-littered desk.

Mulkey came to his feet, jaw unhinged on a surprised oath as he recognized the black-garbed mystery rider who covered the office with his twin guns.

"Wh—what is this?" demanded Tol Hogan, finding his voice at last. "Yuh're the Masked Rider, ain't yuh? Why are yuh bringin' one of Von Bemmel's stock tenders in here thisaway?"

The Masked Rider grinned. His prisoner, then, was an employee of the Thundergust Freight Line. Hogan's competitor!

"I looked up the spot where the Phantom Forty-Niner held up yore bullion wagon in the Pass yesterday, Hogan," the black-clad man said grimly. "The Phantom made off with yore gold by means of a string of pack mules. I trailed the mules to a lonely spot at the base of Snakefang Peak. This feller here yuh call Slim Jenson is the man who was ramroddin' them mules. And he has one of yore Golderado bullion crates at his camp!"

"Slim" Jenson licked his lips frantically. Fergus Mulkey and Tol Hogan were staring at the Von Bemmel stock tender as if they were seeing a ghost.

"Jenson may be the Phantom yuh're looking for, or he may be nothin' more'n an underling of the Phantom's," the Masked Rider went on. "Take a pasear out to Jenson's camp and mebbe yuh'll find out in daylight what I couldn't find tonight—the Phantom's bullion loot."

The Masked Rider backed toward the door, holstering one of his Colts and reaching for the knob.

"And now, gentlemen, I've got to be on my way," the Robon Hood outlaw drawled, a note of humor creeping into his voice. "Slim Jenson here holds the clue to the Phantom Forty-Niner's whereabouts. I'm positive of that. The rest is up to you."

The black-caped mystery rider stepped out into the night. In a moment more the hoofbeats of his black stallion were drumming a swift rataplan down Lodefork's main street as the Robin Hood outlaw streaked out of town in getaway, heading for the abandoned gold mine where Blue Hawk would keep a rendezvous with him on the morrow. . . .

Slim Jenson exposed crooked, yellow-stained teeth in a grin as he faced Hogan and Mulkey.

"How about cuttin' this rope, Tol?" he asked thickly.

Fergus Mulkey picked a heavy pair of

shears off his desk and strode over to the trussed-up stock tender. Before he could start cutting at the pleated rawhide, Tol Hogan interrupted him.

"Just a minute, Ferg. I don't think that Masked Rider was lyin' when he said Jenson is workin' in cahoots with the Phantom."

Mulkey hesitated, turning to stare at his senior partner.

"We can't take a wanted owlhooter's word against Jenson's, Tol!" exclaimed the young freighter. "We'll have plenty of explaining to do to the sheriff as it is, not makin' any effort to stop the Masked Rider from leaving town."

Tol Hogan thrust his thumbs through his suspender straps and approached Slim Jenson, his jaw outthrust in stubborn determination.

"What's yore story, Slim?" he demanded. "It had better be good, I'm warnin' yuh."

Jenson scuffed the floor with a hobbed boot sole.

"I admit this Masked Rider hombre dabbed his loop on me over Snakefang way," he said. "I was roundin' up some of Von Bemmel's pack mules that strayed off'n our holdin' range. And I admit he seen one of Golderado's empty bullion crates at the spot where I camped. But it was there when I drove my mules down to the creek for water."

Fergus Mulkey slid his heavy shears across one of the ropes which bound Jenson's arms to his sides and the razorsharp blades severed the stock tender's bonds. As Slim Jenson shook off the ropes and began rubbing his chafed arms Tol Hogan flipped back his coat-tail and lifted a six-gun from holster.

"Just a minute, Slim," rasped the big freighter. "We're takin' a pasear over to the sheriff's house before I turn yuh loose. Why would the Masked Rider risk bein' captured if he didn't have the deadwood on yuh?"

THE smile faded from Jenson's lips. Bitter hatred flashed in his close-set, gooseberry eyes.

"Yuh cause me any trouble, Tol," he warned, "and Dutch will make yuh wish yuh hadn't. Don't forget I'm on Von Bemmel's pay roll."

Tol Hogan swung his gaze to Fergus Mulkey, ignoring Jenson.

"Look at it this way, Ferg," Hogan said. "Von Bemmel's swore to ruin our freightin' outfit. How do we know Dutch ain't the Phantom? After all, the Masked Rider claimed he trailed Slim's mules from the scene of Eagle-Eye Yorkup's bushwhackin'."

For the first time, doubt showed in Fergus Mulkey's face. A man fifteen years Hogan's junior, Mulkey had been content to follow Tol Hogan's lead in matters of business decisions, but in this matter he had so far taken the lead. Fergus Mulkey had arrived in Lodefork five years before, a wealthy Easterner hunting adventure. Failing to make a gold strike, Mulkey had furnished the capital which had founded the stage and freight line in competition with Dutch Von Bemmel, letting Tol Hogan supply the savvy and rolling stock.

"By golly, it makes sense!" Mulkey agreed, crossing over to his desk and shrugging into his brown tweed coat. "Jenson, if you're innocent you shouldn't be afraid to talk this thing over with the sheriff!"

Slim Jenson grumbled an oath, stared at the leveled six-gun in Tol Hogan's fist and then shrugged.

"It's *bueno* far as I'm concerned," he grunted. "But when Dutch Von Bemmel hears yuh're accusin' him of bein' the Phantom Forty-Niner, fur's goin' to fly around these diggin's."

Leaving the Hogan & Mulkey office, the three crossed the main street and headed up the alley past the jailhouse, climbing the ridged slope to the little unpainted frame shanty where Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff lived with his deputy, Jim Krain.

Receiving no answer in reponse to their repeated hammering on the door, Tol Hogan turned to face Mulkey and Jenson in the moonlight.

"Reckon the sheriff's still out with his posse, huntin' for the Masked Rider," he grunted. "Kaw will be fit to be tied when him and his bounty-hungry deppities get back and hear that the Masked Rider visited Lodefork in person tonight."

They headed back toward the main street, Slim Jenson becoming increasingly restive.

"How about turnin' me loose?" he demanded testily. "I need some grub and some shut-eye."

Fergus Mulkey spoke up harshly:

"We've got to hold Jenson until Stoneruff gets back to town, Tol. If we turn him loose we'll have Dutch Von Bemmel and his gunhawks making trouble for us."

Hogan scowled in the darkness as they reached the edge of the main street and crossed over to their freight barn.

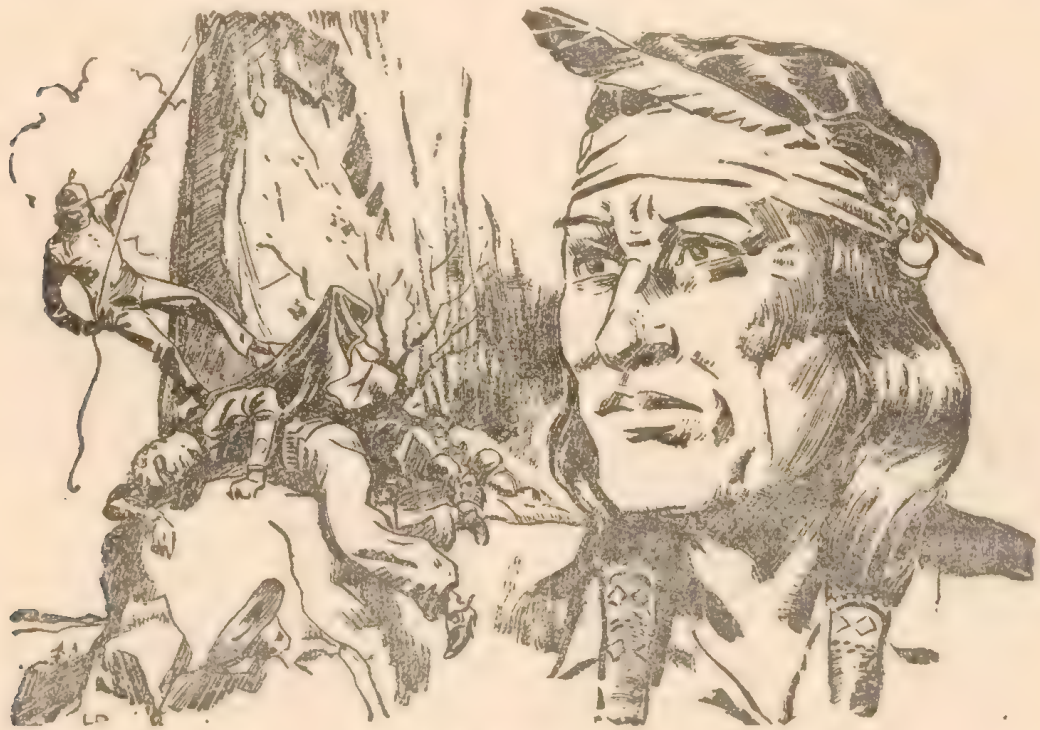
"How about locking him up in our granary, Tol?" suggested Mulkey. "It's warm in there, and you and I are the only ones who've got keys to the place."

Disregarding Slim Jenson's angry protests, the two freight line partners escorted the rival stock tender through their feed barn, across a corral and halted before a squat log-walled structure where they kept sacked oats, stock salt and other materials out of the weather.

Arriving back at their office with the intention of locking up for the night, Hogan and Mulkey were startled to find Dutch Von Bemmel waiting for them with his gunhawk, Cabral. Their rival's face was harsh-etched in satanic lines under the glow of his cigar as Von Bemmel moved out of the shadows to face them.

Whiskey fouled his breath and he was in an ugly temper.

"A swamper over at the Last Chance Saloon told me he seen yuh hazin' one of my men acrost the street at gun's point,



BLUE HAWK

Jenson revealed his first sign of fight as Tol Hogan unlocked the heavy slab door. But the stock tender was no match for Fergus Mulkey's powerful arms, and he was pushed into the windowless granary. Swiftly Hogan was twisting a massive brass key in the lock.

"The more I think of it, the more I believe the Masked Rider was right about Jenson makin' off with them twelve bullion crates, Ferg," Hogan remarked, as the two partners headed back toward their office. "Sounds pretty thin, Jenson's mules driftin' as far off as Snakefang. And Dutch Von Bemmel could be the Phantom, easy enough—him bein' out of town half of the time."

Hogan!" Von Bemmel blustered without preliminaries. "I laid down a pat poker hand to come over here and find out what's what."

HOGAN'S fist was around his gun butt as he moved closer to his enemy, keeping a wary eye on the ubiquitous Cabral.

"That's right—Slim Jenson was the man!" Hogan rasped. "We just come from lockin' him up in my granary. We're holdin' him for Sheriff Stoneruff."

Von Bemmel rolled his cigar butt across his lips.

"And just what," he demanded thickly, "did my stock tender do that warrants

him bein' jailed by somebody who don't tote a law star?"

Hogan and Fergus Mulkey exchanged glances.

It was Mulkey who decided to lay their cards on the table.

"We got proof," he said acidly, "that Slim Jensen was mixed up in that bullion robbery in Tinspout Pass yesterday."

Von Bemmel's jaw dropped. His throat worked as if he were having difficulty framing words in rebuttal to Mulkey's accusation.

He shot a sidelong glance at his Mexican bodyguard.

"I'm Jenson's boss," he said finally. "I demand a chance to talk to him. If Jenson's mixed up with the Phantom Forty-Niner, I want to get the lowdown."

Loosening his gun in holster on the off chance that Von Bemmel might attempt gunplay in an effort to rescue his henchman, Tol Hogan headed back toward the granary, paced by Fergus Mulkey and the fuming boss of the Thundergust Freight Line.

Reaching the granary door, Mulkey reached in his pocket and fumbled for the keyhole.

The door swung open.

"Stay where you are, Slim!" rasped Fergus Mulkey. "We brought Dutch in to have a pow-wow with you."

No answer came from the darkness. Dutch Von Bemmel pawed in his vest pocket for a match, wiped it into flame against his pant leg, and peered around at the stacks of grain bags which packed the building from floor to rafters.

The match illuminated the small space of open floor in the granary, but revealed no trace of Slim Jenson.

"He's gone!" Tol Hogan barked. "And I'm dead shore I locked the door, not five minutes ago!"

Fergus Mulkey struck a match and leaped to peer behind the door. He turned around with a sheepish, baffled look on his face. It was true. Their prisoner had vanished!

Von Bemmel laughed, a deep rumbling sound that welled from the depths of his chest.

Even the stolid Cabral was smiling.

"Either you buckos was drunk and imaginin' things," he jeered, "or else yore chicken flew the coop. In which case you two are goin' to have the devil's own time provin' my stock tender had anything to do with that bullion robbery yesterday!"

CHAPTER VIII

Joaquin Murietta's Serape

ANGIE HOGAN bustled into her father's freighting office at noon the next day with a sheaf of yellow envelopes she had picked up at the Overland Telegraph office.

The girl's eyes were shining with excitement as she went over to a desk where Fergus Mulkey, his eyes red-rimmed from lack of sleep, was busy checking over a manifest for a load of nails and lumber their firm had just hauled in from Tucson.

"Wayne Morgan must be a paragon of virtue, Fergie!" Angie exclaimed, depositing the telegrams on his desk. "Everyone from the Governor of New Mexico down to a banker in Reno say his character and reliability are above reproach. Won't Dad be glad when he hears?"

Mulkey laid aside his papers and stood up, ignoring the telegrams to slip an arm around the girl's slim waist.

"When are you going to marry me, honey?" he asked abruptly. "I'm going to Phoenix next week to buy some new draft stock. How about making a honeymoon out of it?"

Angie wriggled from his grasp as he bent to kiss her.

"Stop it, Fergie!" she said and flushed rosy. "I told you I wasn't sure if I loved you, so how can I marry you?"

Mulkey's handsome face reddened and angry lights danced in his amber eyes, betraying the irrational jealousy in the man.

"Still waiting for Del Harmon to pop the question, eh?" he said tartly. "If we lose another gold shipment that young whippersnapper will find himself without a job. He wouldn't rate so high with you if he wasn't production super over at Golderado. Did you ever stop to think about that?"

Angie Hogan picked up the telegrams and thrust one of them into Mulkey's hands, seeking to veer the conversation away from the personal.

"These wires mean that Wayne Morgan will drive our next Golderado shipment to Sacatone," she said.

Mulkey grunted, turning back to his desk.

"Wayne Morgan," he said, "appears to have drifted elsewhere, Angie. Your dad

checked at the Lucky Nugget Hotel this morning and our cowboy friend isn't registered there."

A shadow fell across the doorstep and a cheery laugh caused Mulkey and the girl to wheel around.

"Morgan's occupyin' Room G at the Lucky Nugget, as of today," said Wayne Morgan, stepping into the office and doffing his gray Stetson. "Did I overhear yuh remark that I am now employed by Hogan and Mulkey?"

Angie pointed to the stack of telegrams in answer to the messages Tol Hogan had sent out.

"You're on our pay roll with a vengeance, Mr. Morgan." The girl laughed. "I knew you hadn't run out on us!"

The young cowboy shook tobacco into a wheatstraw paper and twisted himself a quirly.

"I just got back from the sheriff's office," he remarked. "Managed to satisfy Kaw Stoneruff and his deputy that I had no part in Eagle-Eye Yorkup's murder the other day. I took the liberty of tellin' 'em I was workin' for Hogan and Mulkey." He grinned as he fired his cigarette. He went on conversationally: "Sheriff Stoneruff's not feelin' so chipper. Seems he come face to face with the Masked Rider down by the Mexican border night before last—and let his quarry slip through his fingers!"

Fergus Mulkey's brows arched.

"The Masked Rider paid us a visit last night," he said, and went on to tell of Slim Jenson's imprisonment in the Hogan & Mulkey granary and his subsequent escape under mysterious circumstances.

Wayne Morgan did not have to feign the surprise and consternation he felt at the news. The escape of Slim Jenson from the granary within a few minutes after he had been locked inside the building convinced the cowboy that Jenson was working as an accomplice for the Phantom Forty-Niner.

"Slim's skipped town, I guess," Mulkey said ruefully. "At any rate he didn't report at Dutch Van Bemmel's this morning for work."

Angie Hogan compressed her mouth grimly.

"I'd be willing to bet," she stormed, "that Von Bemmel is the outlaw who's masquerading in Joaquin Murietta's costume! After all, nobody seems to know anything about Dutch's past, before he showed up in Lodefork with his string of freight wagons and stage-coaches. And the Phantom Forty-Niner got his start over in Joaquin Murietta's old stamping grounds in the California Mother Lode country."

TOL HOGAN put in his appearance at that moment. His weary eyes lost some of their worry when he had perused the telegrams establishing Wayne Morgan's status.

"I've just come from the Golderado Syndicate office, Morgan," the freighter said gravely. "They've got six crates of bullion ready at the smelter for shipment to railhead. We're makin' the Tinspout Pass run tomorrow night, Morgan. And heaven help us if the Phantom Forty-Niner chouses that shipment!"

Morgan eyed the big freighter quizzically, smoke forking through his nose.

"*We* are makin' the run?" he echoed.

Tol Hogan turned to his daughter, seeing the concern written on her face.

"I'm ridin' shotgun guard with Morgan, Angie," Hogan said. "You know what this shipment means to the firm. If we lose it, we lose our Golderado contract and Arizona Allied will move in like a pack of vultures to gobble up Lodefork."

Wayne Morgan left the Hogan & Mulkey office and headed for a livery barn where he had left his hammerhead roan to be shod.

It was impossible to keep a bullion shipment secret, and Morgan knew that the town already knew that Hogan & Mulkey were making a fourth attempt to reach Sacatone with Golderado's ingots tomorrow night. If Dutch Von Bemmel was the Phantom Forty-Niner, he was probably at work this moment plotting another hold-up in Tinspout Pass. One more successful robbery would rub out Von Bemmel's competition in the mining camp's freighting business and bankrupt the Golderado Coöperative as well.

When Wayne Morgan had left Blue Hawk at their rendezvous that morning, he had instructed his Yaqui partner to ride out to Snakefang Peak and investigate Slim Jenson's mule camp. If the Phantom Forty-Niner's gold loot was cached anywhere in the vicinity of Snakefang, Blue Hawk was the man to ferret out the hiding place of the Golderado treasure. There was no move to be made until he had further information, so Morgan spent the rest of the afternoon playing cards at the Last Chance Saloon.

Already, he found himself the focal point of attention among the jackleg muckers and buckskin-clad muleskinners who frequented the barroom. He was being pointed out as the driver who would risk a bushwhack trap in Tinspout Pass tomorrow night when Hogan & Mulkey would attempt to run another bullion shipment to Sacatone. Odds were quoted in Morgan's hearing that the bullion would wind up in the Phantom's possession and that Morgan would share the fate of old Eagle-Eye Yorkup, who only that morning had been buried in Lodefork's Boot Hill.

If Morgan was disturbed by the town's foreboding, the rugged young cowpuncher gave no sign of it. He ate that night at the Hogan home, enjoying a fried chicken dinner perpared by Angie and shared by her father, Fergus Mulkey, and Del Harmon.

Throughout the meal Wayne Morgan was aware of the undercurrents of jealousy which coursed between Mulkey and the quiet-voiced young superintendent of the Golderado mining combine. But so far as he could see, Angie divided her attention equally between her suitors.

It was dark when Morgan made his way down the slope from the Tol Hogan home on the hillside overlooking the mining town and headed for the Lucky Nugget Hotel. Arrived there, he took the key to Room G from the rack behind the clerk's desk and headed up the lobby stairs, intending to get a good rest in preparation for the hazardous wagon trip to Sacatone twenty-four hours later.

A rainstorm was building in the southwest and thunder rattled the old two-story hotel as Morgan went down the dimly-lighted corridor, unlocked Room G, and entered.

It was not until he had lighted the coal oil lamp on his washstand that the cowboy realized he was not alone. Facing him across the room was Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff, a Colt .45 in his gnarled fist. Seated on the bed were Deputy Jim Krain and Dutch Von Bemmel, each with a gun palmed.

For a long moment, no sound interrupted the gelid quiet as Wayne Morgan faced the three stony-eyed men.

"All right, *amigos*," Morgan finally said coolly. "Is this a social call—or what?"

A PAIR of nickel-plated handcuffs glinted in the lamplight as the Lodefork sheriff approached Morgan. For a fleeting instant, the cowboy wondered if Stoneruff had somehow recognized him for the Masked Rider as an aftermath of their meeting during the fiasco of Whetstone Canyon. But such was not the case.

"Yuh're under arrest, Phantom Forty-Niner!" Stoneruff said.

Morgan lifted his arms before the sheriff's gun drop.

"Are you loco, Sheriff?" the cowboy demanded, half-amused. "I thought I proved to yuh this afternoon that I had nothin' to do with the killin' of Cal Stagg and old Yorkup—"

Stoneruff reached out to snap his manacles on Morgan's wrists.

"I believed yuh, shore," snapped the sheriff. "But my deputy didn't! He snooped around yore room this evenin' while yuh was eatin' supper. . . Show him what yuh found, Jim."

Wayne Morgan turned to stare at Deputy Krain. Holstering his gun, Krain stood up, revealing Morgan's saddle-bags on the bed beside him, bags which the waddy had left hanging on a bed post. They contained only extra shirts and socks and shaving kit.

Reaching inside one of the tooled leather *alforjas*, the deputy drew out a folded Mexican serape of vivid rainbow hues, followed by a bright green scarf with twin eye-holes cut in it. From the other saddle-bag, Krain drew out a ball-tassled Chihuahuan sombrero, a gaucho jacket trimmed with gold braid, and a neatly-folded pair of velveteen *charro* trousers, with sterling silver conchas in their flaring V-shaped bottoms.

Morgan stared uncomprehendingly at the Mexican outfit.

"I never saw that stuff before," he said flatly.

"These fancy duds," Dutch Von Bemmel spoke up, "are what the ignorant peons call the shroud Joaquin Murietta was buried in back in the Fifties. Us not bein' superstitious, we know it's the disguise worn by the Phantom Forty-Niner durin' his hold-ups!"

A storm of conflicting emotions surged through Wayne Morgan in the moments which followed. Without doubt, the real Phantom Forty-Niner had visited his room here in the Lucky Nugget Hotel to plant the fatal masquerade costume in his saddle-bags. But proving it was a frame-up might be impossible!

Deputy Jim Krain, whether by accident or by an anonymous tip-off, had visited

his bedroom to discover the damning evidence—and here it was!

"I got a cell waitin' for yuh, Phantom," Kaw Stoneruff said grimly. "The whole town's laughin' because I let the Masked Rider stampede my posse's hosses over in Whetstone Canyon the other night. I reckon this town'll forget that when they find out I've nailed the Phantom Forty-Niner red-handed!"

Startled loafers in the lobby of the Lucky Nugget witnessed Wayne Morgan's departure from the hostelry a few minutes later, handcuffed and with Sheriff Stoneruff's Colt .45 jabbed in his back. By the time the lawman had marched his prisoner the length of the main street, a sizable throng had streamed out of saloons and gambling halls en route, electrified by the news of the Phantom's capture.

CHAPTER IX

Lynch Law

ONCE part of a brewery, the walls of the Lodefork jail were three feet thick, of brick construction, with loophole windows which made each cell look like the dungeon of a bastille. A half-hour after Morgan had been lodged in the north wing of the jail, Sheriff Stoneruff came in from his office with Tol Hogan and Angie. The sheriff permitted his visitors as far as the iron-barred wall of the cage, but refused to open the cell.

"This is an outrage, Morgan!" Tol Hogan exploded. "Somebody framed yuh! And I got a hunch it was Dutch Von Bemmel. I seen him palaverin' with Jim Krain just before supper."

Wayne Morgan grinned bleakly in the lantern light, his eyes on Angie Hogan's worried face.

"They've only got circumstantial evidence to go on, Hogan," Morgan said. "They can't get any too far with that—you know that. Just keep in touch with me and we'll see what turns up."

After promising to do that, Hogan and his daughter left the jail.

Twenty minutes later, above the rumble of thunder which presaged a torrential rainstorm, Wayne Morgan heard the door of the sheriff's office open. Kaw Stoneruff came into the north wing of the jail and approached Morgan's cell, his hawkish features grave in the glare of his jail lantern.

"I got bad news, Morgan," he said. "Dutch Von Bemmel got himself likkered up and he's rowelin' the miners into formin' a lynch mob to storm my jail. I wanted yuh to know—in case I can't hold the fort—that I'm not shore of yore guilt. Anybody could have planted that Joaquin Murietta rig in yore saddle-bags."

Wayne Morgan came to his feet, glancing around at the thick brick walls of the Lodefork calaboose.

"This *juzgado* looks like it could hold out against a hangin' bee," he said uneasily. "But thanks for yore kind words, Sheriff. If things get rough, yuh might slip me my guns."

Stoneruff rubbed his jaw worriedly.

"My front office is shake-roofed and the wood clapboards wouldn't hold up," he said. "If Von Bemmel breaks in the front office, I'll make our stand in the cell block here—and in that case I'll trust yuh with yore hoglegs and a couple shotguns. It'll be yore own neck yuh'll be fightin' for."

Kaw Stoneruff prepared to head back to his office. He was in the act of locking the cell block door when the street entrance of the office was banged open, to admit a gust of icy wind.

Framed on the doorstep was Dutch Von Bemmel, his blocky face reddened with the whisky he had imbibed. Stoneruff's heart congealed as, behind Dutch, he caught sight of a throng of faces massed in front of the jail, mostly saloon toughs and Mexicans from the tougher fandango houses in the mining camp.

"Don't give us no trouble, Sheriff," Von Bemmel said icily. "We've come to string up the Phantom Forty-Niner. There's no use wastin' the taxpayers' money on a court trial."

Stoneruff tugged a gun from holster and advanced to the doorway, staring out at the angry saloon mob. He estimated the throng to number more than two hundred, armed to the teeth and crazed with lynch fever.

"I ain't releasin' my prisoner without due process of law, no matter how guilty he is, Dutch!" Stoneruff shouted. "Yuh're all drunk. I'll kill the first man who sets foot over my door sill!"

From somewhere behind Von Bemmel a chunk of quartz ore came whizzing through the doorway to smash Stoneruff in the temple. The sheriff collapsed like a pole-axed animal.

The lynch mob roared above the thun-

derclaps of the approaching storm as they saw their leader pounce to grab Stoneruff's ring of jail keys from the unconscious man's belt. Cabral and another burly Mexican flanked Von Bemmel as the beefy freighter kicked open the cell block door and headed for Wayne Morgan's cell in the north wing of the jail.

By the time Von Bemmel had found the correct key, the cell block was jammed with whiskey-crazed lynchers, baying for the kill like a wolf pack after a crippled stag.

WAYNE MORGAN lashed out with desperate fists as Cabral and the other Mexican came through the cell door with Von Bemmel at their backs. He felt Cabral's hawk-beak nose pulp under a terrific haymaker, then he was forced to his knees by a kick in the pit of the stomach from the Mexican's hobbed boot.

Dizzy with pain, Wayne Morgan was vaguely aware of being dragged out of the jail into a beating rain. The lynch mob moved up the hill toward the Lodefork courthouse, their numbers doubled by morbid prospectors and townspeople who were braving the tempest to witness the lynching of the Phantom Forty-Niner.

Morgan was too weak to struggle as he felt himself being dragged up a flight of wooden steps to the county gallows platform. A rain-wet rope was dangling from the upright of the gallows and the cowboy felt himself locked in iron-fingered grips as his arms were trussed behind his back and the deadly five-roll loop of a hangman's knot was adjusted around his throat.

Jagged slivers of lightning ruptured the clouds which scudded low over the mining camp. In the vivid, pinched-off glare Wayne Morgan was astonished to see Angie Hogan standing at one corner of the gallows platform, together with a group of painted girls from the town's dancehalls.

The fact that women were present to witness his doom brought a sick stab of revulsion coursing through Wayne Morgan. He thought of Blue Hawk, then realized that his faithful Yaqui partner was many miles away at this moment, scouting the rugged slopes of Snakefang Peak in search of the Phantom's bullion cache.

The rolled hangman's knot was in place against his left ear now, and Morgan found himself standing alone on the trap-door of the gallows, the rain beating a requiem on the splintery planks. Dutch Von Bemmel strode over to the far corner of the platform, coiling his scarred hand around the hardwood lever which would open the trap-door and plummet Wayne Morgan to his doom.

The howling lynch mob was pushing around the gallows, unable to surround it because the platform had been built against the corner of the high board fence which surrounded the Border County courthouse yard.

"Hangrope justice for the ghost of Joaquin Murietta, men!" shouted Dutch Von Bemmel, gripping the trip lever with both fists. "We'll see whether the Phantom Forty-Niner is spook enough to resurrect himself a third time!"

A lightning flash ripped across the heavens, throwing Snakefang Peak and the surrounding ridges of the Thundergust Range into sharp relief.

Wayne Morgan tensed himself as he saw Dutch Von Bemmel heave back on the bar lever. Then he felt the trap-door drop from under his spurred cowboots and he was plummeting downward at rope's end, with a broken neck and eternity waiting at the end of that short drop!

But miraculously, Wayne Morgan's plunge through the gallows was not checked by the hangrope which had been thrown up and over the crossbeam atop the gallows!

His boots landed hard on the adobe earth below the platform floor and he pitched forward on his knees, stunned by the impact of his ten-foot drop. The hangrope plummeted down behind him in reptilian coils from the open trap overhead.

A lightning flash poured a shaft of greenish witch-glow through a plank space which was missing from the board fence at his back, and by its brief glare Wayne Morgan caught sight of Tol Hogan's grinning face before him.

A bowie knife glinted as Hogan cut the hangrope inches from Morgan's ear. A second deft stroke severed the sisal reata which bound the cowboy's arms to his sides.

Then, without giving the cowboy a chance to recover his breath, the burly freighter dragged Morgan out through the hole in the fence, away from the gallows inside the courthouse yard.

"Angie was waitin' with a sharp knife up there where the hangrope was tied to the gallows railing, Morgan," Hogan rasped in the cowboy's ear. "She cut the rope when Von Bemmel sprung the trap.

In the dark nobody will know who did it!"

HOGAN dragged the cowboy to his feet and, gripping Morgan's hand, led him at a sprint off through the slanting rain. Fifty yards from the courthouse fence, Morgan saw his own hammerhead roan waiting, saddled and bridled, with Del Harmon holding the reins.

"Yore getaway's up to you, son!" Hogan panted, as he helped the cowboy mount. "In view of what's happened tonight, I doubt if it'll be safe for yuh to come back to Lodefork in time to drive my bullion wagon tomorrow night. *Hasta la vista*, Morgan—and good luck to you!"

Wayne Morgan shook his head to clear it. The clamor coming from the courthouse yard, invisible in the rain-lashed night, warned him that the lynch mob had discovered their victim's incredible escape.

"Wait a minute, Hogan!" gasped the cowboy, spurring after Hogan and the Golderado superintendent as they headed down the hillside. "If I could meet yuh some place tomorrow night, and make that Tinspout Pass run with yuh—"

Tol Hogan paused, scowling indecisively in the gloom.

"All right—make it the old sawmill where Chinaman's Crick runs into the canyon downstream from town!" Hogan called up to him. "I'll meet yuh there at nine o'clock."

Waving in farewell, Wayne Morgan wheeled his roan and galloped off in the direction of the Thundergusts. Topping a cactus-spined ridge overlooking the mining camp, he reined up as a vivid lightning burst gave him a view of Lodefork.

Hogan and Del Harmon had vanished among the false-fronts lining the main street, the rain obliterating their tracks so that the enraged saloon mob would not be able to link the two men with Morgan's getaway. The brief duration of the lightning flash gave Wayne Morgan a glimpse of the milling throng around the county gallows, and he felt a quick pang of anxiety for Angie Hogan's safety. If anyone had seen the girl cut the hangrope in two, Morgan knew the berserk mob would not hesitate to string her up in his stead.

Two miles out of Lodefork Morgan gigged the roan down on the Sacatone road and, hunched in saddle against the downpour of rain, headed for the cinder cone on the Tinspout Pass summit where he and Blue Hawk were camped.

CHAPTER X

Blue Hawk's Discovery

RACING swiftly across the land, the tempest had blown itself out by midnight. Wet to the skin, Wayne Morgan sent his roan zigzagging up the cinder cone and dipped down into the crater where he had left Midnight and the pinto pack horse.

"*Hola*, Senor!"

Blue Hawk emerged from the lava where they had made their camp. Morgan slid out of saddle, flipping an oxbow stirrup over the Brazo's horn and untying the latigo strap to strip off the roan's kack.

Morgan grinned bleakly as he saw the Yaqui staring at the sinister noose which still dangled from his friend's neck. He tugged the hangman's knot off his head and tossed it to one side and entered the hideout. Inside the cavern, he explained to his Indian *compadre* the near-fatal results of his brief sojourn in Lodefork.

"Have any luck over on Snakefang Peak, Hawk?" Morgan inquired, when he had concluded his own story.

The Yaqui's mouth widened in one of his rare smiles. He did not answer at once but, leading Morgan out of the lava grotto, Blue Hawk headed around a jutting shoulder of rock and pointed into the depression beyond, forming the eastern half of the cinder cone's shallow crater.

Huddled in a group there Morgan saw six packmules grazing in the sparse grama grass which carpeted the depression.

"Slim Jenson's pack train!" Morgan exclaimed. "What was the use of bringin' 'em over the Snakefang, Hawk?"

For answer, Blue Hawk led his partner of the danger trail over to a patch of loose scoria, or slaggy lava caused by the erosion of the burned-out volcanic cone. Getting down on hands and knees, Blue Hawk scrabbled dog-fashion with his hands until he had scooped out a shallow hole. Reaching into the excavation, the Yaqui pulled out a gleaming yellow object which resembled an oblong loaf of bread, an object of incredible weight for its size.

Embossed on the sides of the object were the words:

GOLDERADO COOPERATIVE MINING SYNDICATE
LODEFORK, ARIZONA TERRITORY

"A gold ingot!" Morgan cried, hefting the heavy bar. "Yuh located the Phantom's bullion cache, then!"

Blue Hawk nodded, burying the ingot under the decomposed lava slag.

"There are forty-nine other bars buried here, Senor," the Indian said. "All the mules could carry over from Snakefang."

Wayne Morgan felt his heart thumping with excitement. Fifty ingots was the tally of the Phantom Forty-Niner's loot from his three raids on the Hogan & Mulkey bullion wagons!

"The Phantom had buried the gold in gunny sacks," Blue Hawk explained in a matter-of-fact voice when they were back inside the lava cave. "They were covered with two feet of quicksand in the middle of the creek where you found Slim Jenson's camp."

Wayne Morgan grinned affectionately at his coppery-skinned partner. The Yaqui's recovery of the missing bullion meant the salvation of the bankrupt Golderado Syndicate, even if the Phantom Forty-Niner was never apprehended. With its staggering losses thus nullified, Lodefork's independent small-claim miners were safe from the threat of the big Arizona Allied combine moving in with its agents to seize their property.

"Buried in quicksand—under runnin' water?" Morgan said. "How did yuh ever locate such a well-hidden cache?"

The Yaqui shrugged. "I cannot take the credit, Senor," he answered. "Slim Jenson arrived at his camp at dawn. He waded out into the stream and lifted a slab of rock off the creek bed. From the chaparral above his camp I saw these things. Under the rock was an iron stake with ropes tied to it. The ropes led into the quicksand *sumadero* a few yards downstream."

Morgan nodded, visualizing the scene at Snakefang Peak. It was obvious that Slim Jenson, following his unexplainable escape from Hogan & Mulkey's granary in Lodefork, had rushed back to his mule camp with the idea of transferring the stolen bullion to a safer hiding place.

"Each rope led to a sack of bullion," Blue Hawk went on. "Slim Jenson pulled them out one by one with his horse, and I let him have the hard work of loading them on his mules. He was sitting down to rest when I walked out of the chaparral and said *'Buenos dias, Senor Jenson.'*"

Wayne Morgan waited for the Yaqui to go on.

"Senor Jenson was very unfriendly," Blue Hawk lamented, with dry humor. "He reached for his guns. My arrow went through his heart and I left him for the buzzards and coyotes."

* * * * *

ANGIE HOGAN accompanied the painted girls of the dancehalls off the gallows platform, leaving behind the keen-honed butcher knife she had used to sever Wayne Morgan's hangrope.

In the confusion following the mob's discovery that the rope had somehow broken and that their intended victim was not to be found under the gallows, the girl forced her way through the milling crowd and headed for the Lodefork jailhouse. That was where her father and Del Harmon had planned to go if their plan to rescue Wayne Morgan succeeded.

Now that her vital part in saving Morgan's life was over, Angie found it difficult to restrain the hysteria which lay close under the surface of her iron will power. Though in the drenching darkness of the rainstorm, she was positive that no one had seen her slip the butcher knife from under her raincoat and sever the hangrope. And the knife was of a common type which could never be traced.

Reaching the county jail, the girl found Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff sitting in his swivel chair while Del Harmon bathed the ugly gash on the lawman's temple caused by the flung rock. Tol Hogan pulled his daughter tenderly into his embrace, letting her sob out her pent-up emotions.

"It's all right, darling," he said huskily. "The cowboy made his getaway. And he knows he owes his life to yore courage, honey. No one will ever suspect that a woman cut that rope tonight. Even if Von Bemmel gets suspicious, he wouldn't think of suspectin' you."

Footsteps hammered up the jail steps and Fergus Mulkey came into the jail office.

"Hear the news, Tol?" he gasped out, swatting rain from his flat-crowned Stetson. "A mob tried to lynch Wayne Morgan but the rope busted and the waddy got away!"

Tol Hogan grinned, hugging his daughter close to his big chest.

"The rope didn't bust," the freighter said. "Angie cut it with a butcher knife. And I was waitin' under the gallows to help Wayne Morgan."

Fergus Mulkey stared incredulously

from his partner to the white-faced sheriff.

"You let the Phantom Forty-Niner get away—on purpose?" he demanded. "And you admit it in front of the sheriff here?"

The Lodefork sheriff snorted, reaching in his pocket for a briar pipe and packing it with a shaky hand.

"Wayne Morgan ain't no more the Phantom than I am," growled the lawman. "I told him as much, just before Von Bemmel's saloon mob broke into the calaboose here."

Deputy Jim Krain came stamping into the jail office, muddy from head to foot. Ignoring the others, Krain approached his boss, wagging his head sympathetically as he watched Del Harmon wind a bandage around the sheriff's head.

"I don't know who heaved that rock, Sheriff," Krain said, "but we shore as shootin' know Von Bemmel organized the necktie party tonight. He's over at the Last Chance now, swillin' down rot-gut. Want me to arrest him for incitin' a riot?"

The sheriff lit his pipe and eased back in his chair, a splitting headache twisting his thin face.

"Von Bemmel would buy out a judge and jury—we wouldn't stand a chance to convict a man with Arizona Allied money and lawyers backin' him," Stoneruff said gloomily. "After all, the lynchin' didn't come off. And Von Bemmel could always claim he was too drunk to know what he was doin'."

Jim Krain spat in the sheriff's cuspidor and hooked his thumbs in shell belts.

"If it wasn't rainin' so hard I'd try to track down that Wayne Morgan hombre," the deputy said. "He couldn't get far, not on foot, and with his arms tied behind him. But him bein' the Phantom, he's prob'ly got friends in Lodefork who are hidin' him right this minute."

Fergus Mulkey grunted an oath.

"You're looking at the Phantom's friends," he said testily, jerking a thumb toward Hogan and his daughter. "My dang-fool partner let a bunch of telegrams sway his better judgment. It was Tol who helped Wayne Morgan escape the noose tonight, Jim."

DEPUTY JIM KRAIN stared aghast at the towering freight boss. He saw Hogan flush angrily.

"Those telegrams," Hogan defended himself, "were proof enough to convince me that Wayne Morgan wasn't the Phantom Forty-Niner. And nobody in this camp is hidin' him, Krain. He got away on his own hoss—which I had Del Harmon bring over from the Lucky Nugget stable."

Jim Krain waved his hands in a gesture of utter defeat.

"Has everybody gone stark crazy?" the deputy bellowed. "Here I find the Phantom's Joaquin Murietta disguise in his hotel room. . . Well, no difference. I don't reckon Lodefork will ever see that Morgan hombre again, not after tonight."

Del Harmon shook his head.

"Tol's going to see Morgan at the Chinaman's Creek sawmill tomorrow evening!" the syndicate man blurted. "Morgan's going to haul our bullion shipment to Sacatone tomorrow night. That's proof enough he's not the Phantom, for my money."

Tol Hogan whirled angrily at the Golderado superintendent.

"You talk too danged much, Del!" thundered the freighter, clapping on his hat and turning to his daughter. "Let's go home, Angie. We're both about tuckered out."

Hogan slammed the door of the jail office and he and his daughter went over to the Hogan & Mulkey yards to lock up for the night. A half-hour later they arrived at their dwelling on the slope overlooking the mining camp.

It was not until Angie had lighted a lamp in the Hogan parlor that they saw the sheet of paper which had been slid under the front door during their absence.

Scowling curiously, Tol Hogan walked over and picked it up. It was a sheet torn off a wall calendar put out as advertising by Hogan & Mulkey Freight Lines, a copy of which hung in every saloon and business house in town.

In the act of crumpling the calendar page to toss into the fireplace, Hogan saw the writing penciled on the blank back of the sheet:

> YOU'LL BE THE SAME AS COMMITTING SUICIDE IF YOU TAKE GOLDERADO'S BULLION SHIPMENT ACROSS THE THUNDERGUSTS TOMORROW NIGHT, TOL.
>
> HOGAN & MULKEY ARE FINISHED. TAKE WARNING AND TEAR UP YOUR CONTRACT WITH THE SYNDICATE.
>
> THE PHANTOM '49er

Angie Hogan came over to her father's side and took the warning message from old Tol's trembling fingers. The girl

blanched as she read the crudely printed letters, which gave no hint as to their writer's identity.

"Dad, the Phantom means business," she pleaded frantically. "Let Von Bemmel's Thundergust Line handle that bullion shipment tomorrow. Even if we go bankrupt, it isn't worth the risk."

Tol Hogan straightened his massive shoulders, a fierce glint kindling in his steely eyes as he regarded his daughter.

"No, by grab!" he thundered. "I'll be toolin' that wagon over Tinspout Pass tomorrow come hell or high water! And Wayne Morgan will be ridin' guard with me. There's nothin' that waddy would like better than to tangle horns with the Phantom—to clear his own name!"

CHAPTER XI

Sawmill Murder Trap

MORGAN and Blue Hawk arrived at the mouth of Chinaman's Creek shortly after dusk had fallen the following night. Trailing their horses was the Masked Rider's black stallion, Midnight. There was a vague hunch in the back of Morgan's head that before this fateful night was finished, he might need the anonymity of the Masked Rider's disguise.

Dismounting in a motte of mesquites which furred the west rim of Chinaman's Creek, Morgan unsaddled their horses. Then he pushed his way through the chaparral until he came to the brink of the low shale cliffs overlooking the broad gulch.

The sway-backed roof of the abandoned sawmill was on the opposite side of Chinaman's Creek. Above it were the weed-grown scars of an old skidrow, topped by a vast slope of stumpage where the sawyers of a bygone generation had felled timber which had gone into the building of Lodefork.

Consulting his watch by the dim starlight, Morgan saw that it was an hour before Tol Hogan was due to arrive at their trysting place. He could take it easy for a while.

A flurry of bats winged through a gaping hole in the gable of the deserted sawmill and sped off into the night to forage for insects. Somewhere down below a waterwheel creaked eerily on its axle. Hogan had selected a truly safe meeting place.

Blue Hawk moved up through the darkness and hunkered down beside his partner of the out-trails.

"We'll be able to see Hogan when he rides up the Whetstone trail from town," whispered Morgan. "He'll be plenty happy when he learns that the bullion shipments he lost are waitin' for him up on the Divide. It's too bad I can't give you the credit for cashin' in Slim Jenson's chips, Hawk."

Blue Hawk shrugged indifferently. For long years, the Yaqui's association with Wayne Morgan had been kept a strict secret. Only when Morgan was carrying out his Robin Hood rôle as the Masked Rider was Blue Hawk even openly associated with the man.

It was eight-thirty before the two spoke again, and then it was Blue Hawk's steely whisper of warning which took Wayne Morgan's gaze off the snaky ribbon of trail which approached the sawmill from the direction of Lodefork.

"By the river—is it a boat, Senor?" Blue Hawk whispered, pointing a dusky arm toward the mouth of Chinaman's Creek.

Wayne Morgan tensed, staring at the spot where the millrace sluiced into the main river. A dark object was moving across the white water, coming inshore. As Morgan stared through the blue gloom he heard a rattle of oars in their locks, and a small rowboat scraped its keel on the sandbar which the creek had built out into the main channel of the Whetstone.

Two men climbed out of the dory and dragged it into the concealment of a willow brake. The two men emerged from the willows and crept noiselessly into the sawmill.

"Tol Hogan wouldn't float downstream from Lodefork," whispered Morgan. "This has the look of a man-trap to me, Hawk."

The Indian nodded agreement. But who could the two mysterious boatmen be? So far as Morgan knew, the only persons who knew of Hogan's appointment here at Chinaman's Creek were Hogan himself and young Del Harmon.

Was it possible that Harmon and Tol Hogan had chosen to keep their rendezvous by rowing downstream in a boat? It was not likely, for they would need horses to get back to Lodefork in time to take the bullion wagon over the Thundergusts.

Bucking the swift current of the Whetstone would be a hazardous undertaking in a rowboat.

Minutes passed with nerve-sapping tension building up in the bodies of the two mystery riders who crouched on the rim-rock above the sawmill. An owl hooted mournfully under the rafters of the building, but no sound came to indicate the presence of the two boatmen.

If unknown enemies knew of Hogan's plan to contact Morgan at this spot, then obviously the mysterious pair were waiting for Morgan to show up at the sawmill. But Morgan could not believe that Hogan had been their informant. After risking his own life to save Morgan from a lynch mob, it was unlikely that Tol Hogan would advertise his rendezvous with a man whom Lodefork believed to be the Phantom Forty-Niner.

THE hands of Morgan's watch stood at nine o'clock sharp when a sound of hoofbeats came through the night and a lone horseman topped the rise beyond the creek and dipped down the trail toward the sawmill.

"That'll be Tol Hogan!" whispered Wayne Morgan.

Rising to his feet he slid a Peacemaker .45 from leather. It was one of the ebony-handled guns which Morgan used in the rôle of the Masked Rider, his other guns having been taken from him by the sheriff at the time of his arrest the night before.

"He goes into a trap, Senor!" whispered Blue Hawk. "Senor Hogan must be warned!"

Cupping his hands over his lips, Wayne Morgan called out Hogan's name. But the rider was already dismounting alongside the sawmill, unable to hear the warning call above the rumble of the waterwheel and the swift stream of the millrace.

They recognized Tol Hogan's towering figure as the Lodefork freighter strode across the loading platform toward the door of the mill. Before Morgan could shout again, the stillness of the sawmill was shattered by the crash of a gunshot.

Dimly against the weathered planking which turned the loading platform to silver under the Arizona stars, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk saw Tol Hogan stagger backwards under the impact of a slug. Then, toppling slowly like a hewn tree, Hogan crashed on his back and lay still.

Two shadowy figures emerged from the mill, grabbed the fallen man by the heels, and dragged him out of sight inside the building. Instantly the door was swung shut.

"They've killed Hogan, whoever they are!" Wayne Morgan said grimly. "And now they're waitin' for me to show up! Come on, Hawk. We won't disappoint the bushwhackin' sons!"

Hurrying back into the chaparral to where they had left their horses, Morgan unbuckled his coiled lariat from a saddle pommel and returned to the rim-rock.

The protruding limb of a dead juniper snag overhung the short cutbank. The cowboy slipped a noose over the limb, drew the pleated rawhide taut in the honda, and dropped the coiled rope to the bottom of the gully.

Then, holstering his gun, Morgan gripped the dangling rope and slid hand-over-hand to solid ground twenty feet below. He jerked on the rope as a signal to Blue Hawk and at once the Yaqui, now wearing a Colt .45 strapped over his waist sash, descended the rope.

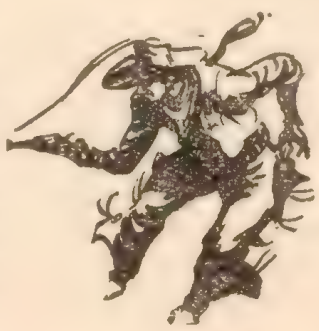
Guns palmed, the two avenging partners of the owlhoot slipped through the brush clumps and glacial boulders until

[*Turn page*]

"Draw! I'm Coming Out... Smoking!"

AT THESE words of challenge from Solo Frayne, Wayne Morgan slapped down with his right hand. His thumb caught the hammer as his hand was whipping up, and a tongue of flame belched from the muzzle of his leaping gun. There was the echo of another stuttering explosion, from Frayne's gun—but Wayne Morgan had been faster. Frayne was done for.

It was a fair-and-square shoot-out, but it brought the Masked Rider the enmity of Twins McFee—the fastest gunfighter he'd ever come up against. McFee and Morgan meet for a showdown in LURE OF THE GUN TRAILS—a Masked Rider novel by Chuck Martin which bristles with quick-trigger action from start to finish! It's featured in the next issue—and it's a humdinger of a yarn that will hold you breathless! Look forward to a grand reading treat.



they reached the weathered boards of the sawmill wall.

Skirting the mill until they reached a broken-out window, Morgan removed his sombrero and peeped cautiously through the cobwebby opening. Starlight gleamed through broken spots in the shingle roof. The interior of the mill was clotted with shadows which the waddy's eyes could not penetrate.

Yet somewhere in that sinister blackness, ambush death was waiting for Morgan to keep his appointment with Tol Hogan!

Turning to Blue Hawk, the cowboy whispered instructions in the Yaqui's ear. Nodding, the Indian slipped noiselessly back across the gully bed to recover the lariat they had left dangling from the rimrock snag.

Above the trilling of frogs in the tules edging the millrace, Morgan thought he could hear a sound of whispering voices inside the buildings. But echoes were confusing, and he could not orient the whispers.

A lemon-yellow moon appeared suddenly over the stump-dotted ridge east of the sawmill, its rays silhouetting the timbers of the rotted wall flanking the creek. One penciled beam fell on the rusty buzz saw in its frame beside the log carriage.

Risking another glimpse through the window, Morgan saw Tol Hogan's corpse sprawled beside a pile of warped dimension lumber just inside the door of the loading platform.

Anger stirred Morgan's pulses as he waited for Blue Hawk's return. There was bitter irony in the fact that old Hogan had met his death on the very eve of his greatest triumph, the recovery of the Phantom Forty-Niner's bullion loot. Morgan thought grimly of how Angie would take the news, remembering how close the motherless girl had been to her father.

BLUE HAWK materialized out of the shadows so soundlessly that even Morgan, who had been expecting him, was startled by his arrival. Without exchanging whispers, Morgan handed the Yaqui his steeple-peaked Stetson and Blue Hawk moved off along the wall to climb up over the edge of the loading platform.

Inching his way toward the closed door of the mill, Blue Hawk slipped the loop of Morgan's lass'-rope over the knob, then paid out several coils of the rope, sliding the reata around a protruding spike on the plank floor of the platform. Unwinding the rope as he moved away from the spike, Blue Hawk's moccasined feet slipped with catlike stealth to the far side of the door.

He was now in a position to swing the door open by pulling on the rope which formed a triangle with the floor spike as its apex. By opening the door with the rope, the Yaqui would thus be out of the line of fire from the waiting ambushers within.

That done, Blue Hawk stared around the moonlighted platform until he located a short length of four-by-four. On this the Indian placed Wayne Morgan's gray Stetson.

Hugging the timber under his right arm, Blue Hawk picked up the rope with which he would swing open the door. Then he squatted on his hams and waited for the owlhoot signal which would notify him that Wayne Morgan had circled behind the sawmill and was inside the building.

Only minutes later an owl's hoot, twice repeated, informed Blue Hawk that all was in readiness. Pursing his lips, the Indian began whistling a tune, low at first, then increasing in volume as if someone were approaching the door by way of the loading platform.

Easing himself to a standing position, Blue Hawk thumped his feet on the planks to imitate a man walking up to the door. Then he tugged on the rope, pulling it around the floor spike.

The door swung open as the rope tugged at the knob, its rusty hinges squealing. A rectangle of moonlight poured into the sawmill, illuminating the pile of lumber behind which Tol Hogan's dead body had been secreted.

Gripping the four-by-four timber in both hands, Blue Hawk thrust Morgan's sombrero around the frame of the door. To waiting eyes inside the mill, it would appear that the cowboy was peering into the building before entering.

As if on signal, two gunshots blasted in unison from somewhere in the dark interior of the sawmill. Blue Hawk was spun around by the impact of two .45 slugs perforating Morgan's sombrero and thudding into the timber.

It was an ancient trick, but it had worked. Triumphant shouts came from inside the sawmill as Blue Hawk pulled the silhouetted Stetson from view and let his body fall heavily to the platform, simulating the fall of a murdered man.

"We got the hombre, no?" shouted a triumphant voice with a strong Mexican accent. "Morgan ees *muerte* now!"

"Hold on, *amigo*!!" came a sharp cry from deeper inside the sawmill. "I ain't so shore a man's head was inside that hat!"

CHAPTER XII

Flaming Guns

IN THE rear end of the sawmill, Wayne Morgan emerged from his hiding place behind the big circular saw as he caught sight of the Mexican's figure outlined blackly against the open doorway.

"*Manos altos*, hombre!" Morgan shouted, earing back the hammers of the six-guns which jutted from his fists. "Hands up, both of yuh! Yuh're under a two-way drop!"

The Mexican spun about to face the sound of the unexpected voice. Then flame spat from the muzzles of the killer's .45s.

Screaming lead bracketed Wayne Morgan's body, one slug caroming off the buzz saw beside him with a clang like a giant gong.

Before the reverberations of the rusty steel disk had time to die off, Morgan dropped gunhammers. Converging lead caught the Mexican before he could shoot again, and the ambusher spun about and crashed heavily on the sawmill floor.

Instantly Morgan flung his body to the floor, as muzzle flashes cut the gloom over by the left wall of the sawmill. The remaining ambusher's bullets thudded into the heavy timbers behind the spot where Morgan had been standing.

Palming one gun, Morgan rolled a dozen feet to the left and came to his knees. A scuffle of spurred boots told him that the Mexican's companion was sidling along the wall toward the open window overlooking the gulch.

With cold precision, Wayne Morgan fanned the hammer of his Colt with the heel of his left palm, driving a close pattern of bullets at the spot where he believed the hidden killer to be.

A scream of agony rewarded him even as his gun hammer clicked on a spent cartridge. Somewhere in the darkness, a six-gun clattered to the floor. Pouching his fuming gun, Morgan whipped his other .45 from leather and headed forward, body crouched low.

He caught sight of a blurring figure diving headlong through the open window, heard the thud of boots as the escaping man raced in the direction of the river and his waiting boat.

Morgan leaped to the window, gun lifted for a shot at the fleeing killer. He was in time to see Blue Hawk leap off the loading platform atop the fugitive's shoulders, smashing the ambusher off his feet.

Morgan straddled out of the window, holding his fire as he saw Blue Hawk and the wounded drygulcher come to their feet. The Indian's right arm pistoned out in a haymaker which caught his adversary on the jaw and sent him reeling backwards.

Arms windmilling, the man kept his feet. Blue Hawk charged in, pressing his advantage with an uppercut which snapped the fellow's head back and drove him sprawling into a sawdust pile.

Blue Hawk was massaging a bruised knuckle as Morgan came up.

"*Bueno*, pard!" the cowboy panted, staring down at the inert figure on the sawdust heap. "Let's see who yuh bagged."

Rolling the unconscious man over on his back, Morgan revealed the contorted visage of Dutch Von Bemmel. The freighter's left shoulder was bleeding where Morgan's slug had creased him.

"So it's Dutch," the cowboy muttered. "This may turn out to be the Phantom Forty-Niner, Hawk. His Mexican pardner will be Cabral, I imagine. We should have guessed as much."

Blue Hawk climbed back onto the logging platform and returned with Morgan's rope. Working swiftly, the Indian tied Von Bemmel's wrists behind his back and trussed his arms securely to his sides.

"Better throw a couple of dallies around his feet, Hawk," Morgan suggested. "We'll let Von Bemmel lie there while we take a look-see inside."

Morgan climbed to the platform and went inside the mill, where moonlight shafting through holes in the roof accentuated the ropy layers of gunsmoke which billowed in the atmosphere. Walking over to the dead Mexican, the cowboy confirmed the fact that his slugs had tallied Cabral, the bodyguard gunslammer who, back in Lodefork, had been the inseparable companion of the freight man subsidized by the Arizona Allied corporation.

Blue Hawk entered the sawmill as Morgan was striking a match and walking over to the lumber pile to inspect Tol Hogan's body. The Lodefork freighter had died instantly, a bullet hole punched through the center of his forehead.

AS THE match guttered out between his fingers, Morgan caught sight of a bundle over by the wall where Dutch Von Bemmel had been crouched in hiding. Striking another match, Morgan inspected the bundle and found that it was the Joaquin Murietta costume which he had last seen being pulled out of his saddlebags by Deputy Sheriff Krain, in his bedroom at the Lucky Nugget Hotel.

"The Phantom's outfit!" exclaimed Blue Hawk. "That means Senor Dutch Von Bemmel—"

Morgan shook his head, tossing his match aside and tucking the Phantom Forty-Niner's costume under his arm.

"It don't prove for shore that Von Bemmel is the Phantom, no," the cowboy said. "I have a hunch that Von Bemmel planned to dress my dead body in these duds, if his killer trap had worked on me like it did on poor old Hogan yonder."

Blue Hawk stared uncomprehendingly at his partner.

"I do not savvy, Senor."

"Sooner or later, searchin' parties would have located the whereabouts of the missin' Hogan," Morgan said. "They'd have also found my corpse, the way Von Bemmel figgered it. And Sheriff Stoneruff would have thought that the Phantom lured Tol Hogan to a trap—and that Hogan shot me just as I tallied him."

Morgan and Blue Hawk walked out onto the loading platform. Dutch Von Bemmel was stirring back to consciousness as they stared down at the freighter's hogtied figure.

"I think we'll take a *pasear* back to Lodefork tonight, Hawk," Morgan said thoughtfully. "We'll load Tol's body on Midnight and leave the Mexican here. Von Bemmel and I will ride double on the roan, then I can switch Tol's body to the roan just outside of town, when I can leave Midnight and make Dutch walk. I reckon when the sheriff hears what I've got to say that Von Bemmel will wind up on the hangman's gallows where he tried to lynch me last night. . . ."

Inside the stockaded yard behind the Golderado Coöperative Syndicate's stampmill, Fergus Mulkey and two burly smeltermen finished loading bullion crates aboard a Hogan & Mulkey wagon, hitched and ready for the Tinspout Pass haul.

Del Harmon, as superintendent in charge of the Syndicate's plant, handed Mulkey the freight manifest for signing.

"It's ten o'clock," Harmon said, thrusting his watch back into his levis pocket. "Hogan should be back from Chinaman's Creek with Wayne Morgan by now."

Fergus Mulkey grunted skeptically.

"You ask me, Morgan won't stop running," Hogan's partner said. "Not after the feel of hangrope that he got last night. I tried to tell old Tol he would waste his time riding out to that sawmill tonight."

Harmon paced back and forth beside the waiting bullion wagon with mounting impatience.

"If Hogan doesn't show up by eleven, I'm going to ask the sheriff to accompany this shipment to Sacatone, Ferg!" the young mining superintendent said. "I believe it's Stoneruff's duty, even if the summit is the county line and the limit of his jurisdiction. After all, this bullion belongs to the citizens who elected Stoneruff to office."

Mulkey grinned crookedly.

"The sheriff would counter that proposition by asking you and me why *we* don't haul that bullion through the Pass, Del. After all, I own half interest in the outfit that has the haulage contract with Golderado. And you're the syndicate boss that's shipping the gold."

Del Harmon turned impulsively to the freighter.

"I'm game to drive this wagon tonight!" he exclaimed. "How about going along as shotgun guard, Mulkey? After all, we can't wait too long for Hogan or we'll miss the westbound train at Sacatone tomorrow morning."

Fergus Mulkey laughed softly.

"Uh-uh. Not me. I don't risk my hide for any bullion shipment—not when the Phantom Forty-Niner is on the loose. Even though I believe Wayne Morgan is the Phantom."

Del Harmon eyed Mulkey with open disdain.

"Yellow, Mulkey?"

The freighter shrugged and turned away.

"Call it that if you like. I don't aim to risk my chances of marrying Angie and settling down to a comfortable old age, Del."

Harmon clamped his lips on a retort as

Fergus Mulkey headed out of sight around the Golderado shaft house.

CHECKING out with the watchman at the main gate, Mulkey walked through the outskirts of town to the county jail. Lights glowed in Stoneruff's office and a lone horse was ground-tied in front of the sheriff's hitch rack.

Glancing casually at the horse, Mulkey halted in his tracks as he saw the figure of a dead man lashed over the rump of the hammerhead roan. He recognized the horse as belonging to Wayne Morgan, the young cowboy Tol Hogan had hired to drive tonight's bullion shipment across the Thundergusts. Walking around behind the horse, Mulkey stared at the dead man's face.

It was Tol Hogan, a bullethole in his forehead!

Footsteps approaching behind him startled Fergus Mulkey as he stood staring at the dead face of his partner. He whirled, to see that Del Harmon had followed him over from the Golderado yards to visit the sheriff's office.

"Hogan won't be riding guard on tonight's shipment, Del," Mulkey said grimly. "He's been murdered. And I got a hunch I know who did it."

Harmon stared at Hogan's corpse, realization hitting him like a kick in the solar plexus. Then he tore his gaze off the dead man and followed Mulkey up the steps into Stoneruff's office.

The two men halted grim-faced in the doorway, staring at the tableau they had interrupted.

Dutch Von Bemmel was standing before the sheriff, his arms lashed with a lariat. Fear had turned Von Bemmel's evil face into a pasty mask. His shirt was bloody on the left shoulder. Behind Von Bemmel, leaning against the door of the cell block, was Wayne Morgan.

"Hogan's dead!" Mulkey broke the silence. "What's happened?"

Stoneruff jerked a thumb toward Dutch Von Bemmel.

"Dutch here claims that his bodyguard, Cabral, killed old Tol over at the Chinaman's Creek sawmill tonight," the sheriff said wearily. "Claims the Mexican thought it was Wayne Morgan he was shootin'."

Dutch Von Bemmel licked his lips desperately.

"That's the truth, I swear it, Kaw!" the freighter gasped. "Like I told yuh, Cabral was comin' over to yore office last night to give hisself up for his part in the lynchin' bee last night. He overheard Del Harmon tellin' yuh that Tol aimed to meet Wayne Morgan over at the sawmill, so Cabral came back to the saloon where I was and told me. I figgered it would be a good way to dab my loop on the Phantom Forty-Niner, so we took a rowboat down to Chinaman's Creek and—"

"Hog-wash!" cut in Wayne Morgan, his voice high-pitched with anger. "How do yuh explain the Phantom's duds I found in the sawmill tonight?"

Von Bemmel stared at the rolled-up bundle of Joaquin Murietta clothing which Morgan had dropped on the sheriff's desk.

"I had nothin' to do with that," Dutch said sullenly. "If it was in the sawmill, I didn't see it. Yuh can't pin that onto me, Morgan."

Del Harmon cleared his throat, eyeing the sheriff from the doorway. Shock and grief had etched deep lines in the superintendent's youthful face.

"I'll go over and—and break the news to Angie," Harmon whispered huskily. "She doesn't know—"

Stoneruff lifted his hand to check the mine boss.

"I've sent Jim Krain over to get Hogan's daughter, Del. She'll be here any minute now."

Harmon nodded miserably and slumped down in a chair beside the door, burying his face in his hands.

"Listen, Sheriff," Fergus Mulkey said. "I don't know what kind of a mess Dutch Von Bemmel has got himself into. I know he hated Tol Hogan, and it wouldn't surprise me if he wasn't the one who killed my partner tonight. But what counts with me is that we've got a bullion wagon loaded and waiting over at the Golderado yards."

Sheriff Stoneruff nodded, his eyes holding an off-focus stare as he regarded Dutch Von Bemmel.

"We've got a train to catch in Sacatone tomorrow morning, Sheriff," Mulkey went on impatiently. "Now that Hogan's dead, I demand my rights as a citizen of Border County and ask you to help guard that shipment through Tinspout Pass."

Before Stoneruff could answer, a girl's scream sounded in front of the jail office. Angie Hogan had discovered her father's corpse lashed to Morgan's roan horse out front!

CHAPTER XIII

Double Jail-Break

JIM KRAIN entered the jail office, supporting the sobbing Angie Hogan, whom he had pulled away from her father's body by main force. Surveying the group of taut-faced men in the lamplighted room, Angie Hogan's grief-stricken gaze shuttled past Fergus Mulkey and came to rest on Del Harmon.

"Oh, Del—Del!"

Breaking free of the deputy sheriff, the girl fell into Harmon's extended arms, weeping her heart out against his shoulder. Stroking her brow tenderly, Del Harmon steered her toward the door.

"I'm taking you home, Angie," Harmon's whisper reached the others. "I'll try to make up to you all I possibly can."

Wayne Morgan, an interested bystander from his position by the sheriff's desk, felt the undercurrents of drama which seethed in the room following Angie Hogan's departure. Fergus Mulkey's face had gone bone-white as he realized that in an emergency, the girl he loved had made her choice between her suitors, irrevocably and decisively.

"Yuh was sayin', Ferg," the sheriff spoke up, "yuh want me to ride guard on yore freight wagon tonight? I'll do so gladly. Who'll drive the wagon? You?"

Mulkey pulled himself back to reality with an effort.

"No-o," he said. "I'll see that bullion in Hades before I'd risk my hide for it."

Wayne Morgan shifted position, smiling bleakly as he saw Mulkey and the sheriff look stares.

"I came back tonight," Morgan said, "to drive that wagon for Hogan."

Mulkey whirled, raw anger transforming his face.

"You?" stormed the freight boss. "The man everyone believes to be the Phantom Forty-Niner? In a pig's eye. I'd tear up our contract with Golderado first!"

Sheriff Stoneruff came slowly to his feet, hitching his gun belts as if he had reached a decision.

"We're not gettin' anywhere palavering this way," said the star-toter grimly. "Mulkey says yuh're the Phantom, Morgan. And you claim Dutch Von Bemmel's the Phantom. You know what I'm goin' to do?"

Morgan and Von Bemmel shook their heads blankly.

"I'm clappin' the two of yuh in my calaboose!" Stoneruff said. "When I get back from Sacatone tomorrow, we'll see what happens next. But so far as tonight goes, the two of yuh stay locked behind jail bars." Stoneruff wheeled to face Fergus Mulkey. "That arrangement all right with you, Ferg?"

Mulkey shrugged. "Obviously they belong in jail, Sheriff. But who does that leave to drive that bullion wagon? Del Harmon?"

Stoneruff tugged at his lower lip thoughtfully.

"No," he said finally. "Angie needs Del. I don't want to separate those two tonight, for old Tol's sake. Jim," the sheriff said suddenly, turning to his deputy, "you're goin' to drive that bullion wagon tonight. That's an order. If yuh don't feel it's yore duty, crossin' the county line, then I'll ask yuh to turn in yore deputy's badge here and now."

Jim Krain glanced at Mulkey, ran his tongue across his teeth, then nodded.

"*'Sta bueno,*" he said reluctantly. "With Wayne Morgan and Dutch here safe in jail, I don't reckon the Phantom is goin' to show up tonight."

Stoneruff reached in his jumper pocket and drew out a ring of keys. Opening the cell-block door, he turned to Dutch Von Bemmel and Wayne Morgan.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "Dutch, I'm puttin' you in the south wing. Morgan, you'll roost in the same cell I put yuh in before the lynchin' bee last night."

Fuming profanely, Dutch Von Bemmel followed the sheriff back into the south wing of the jail. Stoneruff cut the freighter's bonds with a pocket knife, ushered his prisoner into a corner cell and locked it. Then he returned to the north wing where Wayne Morgan was waiting.

"Listen, Sheriff," Morgan whispered as he followed Stoneruff to the cell he had occupied the night before. "I've got somethin' to tell yuh. When I'm finished, if yuh want to lock me up, all right. But I happen to have a few facts yuh should know—among them bein' that I know where the Phantom Forty-Niner's entire bullion loot is buried!"

THEIR heads together in the privacy of the north jail wing, Stoneruff listened intently to what Wayne Morgan had to say. A look of growing amaze-

ment eased the taut muscles of Stoneruff's face as he listened to Morgan's incredible disclosures. When the cowboy had finished, Kaw Stoneruff reached out to grip his hand in the darkness.

"The Masked Rider is actually a friend of yores, Morgan?" he asked. "Yuh know know where he is this minute? And he can lead me to the Phantom's gold cache?"

Morgan lifted his right hand as if taking an oath.

"On my honor, Sheriff. Yuh got to decide whether yuh want to gamble on my tellin' yuh the truth or not."

The sheriff thrust his ring of jail keys into Morgan's hand.

"Tol Hogan lost his life because he trusted yuh, cowboy. And Hogan was the best friend I had. I reckon that's enough for me to go on."

Grinning, Wayne Morgan stepped into the cell and Stoneruff clanged the iron door loudly, for the benefit of Dutch Von Bemmel in the opposite wing. Then the sheriff strode back into the front office where Deputy Jim Krain was busy taking shotguns out of the locked cabinet beside Stoneruff's desk.

Shouldering the buckshot guns, Stoneruff and Krain headed out into the night, making in the direction of the Golderado Syndicate yards where the loaded bullion wagon was waiting. . . .

From the barred window of his cell in the brick jail, Wayne Morgan watched Fergus Mulkey returning down a side street with a tall, frock-coated man whom Morgan recognized as the undertaker who had taken charge of Eagle-Eye Yorkup's and Cal Stagg's bodies.

Before long Morgan saw Mulkey and the coroner heading back up the street in the moonlight, carrying Tol Hogan's stiffening corpse on a pallet between them.

Morgan's cheeks ballooned with a sigh of relief. If Mulkey and the coroner had chosen to transport Hogan's body to the undertaking parlors with the cowboy's saddle horse, it would have complicated Morgan's plans. Even as it was, there was an element of risk in getting away from the jail in the light of the full moon, in case anyone on the mining camp street caught sight of him mounting the roan which was waiting in front of the jail.

Presently Morgan heard a rumble of iron-tired wheels approaching the jail, and from the opposite window of his corner cell he caught sight of the Hogan & Mulkey Conestoga passing by, headed up the Thundergust road. Deputy Jim Krain was handling the lines while Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff was seated in the Conestoga box straddling the bullion crates, moonlight glinting off the double-barreled shotgun in his grasp.

Unless Morgan missed his guess, plenty would happen to that bullion wagon before it crossed Tinspout Pass tonight.

When the two lawmen and the freight wagon had disappeared over the rise on its way into the Thundergusts, Morgan eased open his cell door and tiptoed his way across the jail wing toward the door of Stoneruff's office.

He paused, realizing that Dutch Von Bemmel would discover that something was amiss when the cell-block door opened and admitted lamplight into the jail. He could hear the Thundergust Freight Line boss pacing his cell in the south wing, restless as a caged animal.

There was a side door to the jail, out of range of Von Bemmel's vision. Morgan crept over to the door, testing key after key from the sheriff's ring until he found one that would fit the massive lock. Quickly he discovered the right one and slipped outside the thick-walled brick jail, locked the door from the outside and pocketed the keys. This side of the jail was in shadow, and Morgan moved along the wall toward the street.

Peering around the corner, he was relieved to note that the mining camp street was deserted. At this hour the fandango houses and saloons and gambling halls were going full blast, filling the night with a subdued roar of tinpanny music, clinking glasses, the occasional jarring laughter of a honkatonk percentage girl.

His hammerhead roan was waiting by the front hitchrack, in full view of anyone happening to glance toward the jail. Putting fingers between his teeth, Morgan whistled a low signal.

The roan, trained to obey with a readiness surpassed only by Midnight, the black stallion, twitched his ears and pulled his arched neck erect, questing the wind for the direction of the whistle.

IN THE act of repeating the signal, Morgan paused. Boots were thudding swiftly along the board walk approaching Stoneruff's door.

Sighting along the front wall of the jail, Morgan saw a tall figure, unidentifiable in the blot of shadow, climb the

office steps and pause, glancing up and down the street. Then, satisfied that no one was looking, the figure slipped surreptitiously into Stoneruff's office.

Morgan grinned. Events were shaping up into the very pattern he had predicted to Kaw Stoneruff a half-hour before.

Turning, Wayne Morgan slipped around behind the jail and hurried along the back wall until he was directly under the window of Dutch Von Bemmel's corner cell. His straining ears were rewarded by an exchange of whispers inside the jail, then the creak of Von Bemmel's cell door opening to release the freighter.

"Here's a pair of smokepoles, Dutch," whispered the prisoner's accomplice. "All set? The horses are waiting."

Dutch Von Bemmel's harsh whisper reached Morgan's ears outside the window: "Morgan's in the north wing. I aim to settle his hash before we leave."

Footsteps withdrew in the direction of the north wing. Wayne Morgan turned and raced along the wall until he came to the window of the cell he had just vacated. He was in time to hear Dutch Von Bemmel's gruff voice from outside the barred door of the cell:

"Morgan! Hey, Morgan!"

The cowboy thought fast. He had overlooked the possibility of Dutch Von Bemmel tarrying to square accounts with his fellow prisoner. Standing up until his head was even with the sill of the iron-barred window, Morgan snored raucously.

"He's asleep!" whispered Von Bemmel's companion. "You can't say Morgan's lacking in nerve, eh?"

Morgan snored again, remembering that the jail cot was deep in shadow, preventing the men outside the cell from knowing whether it held a sleeping form or not. At that moment, Morgan's eardrums throbbed to a deafening blast of a six-gun, triggered through the bars of the cell inside. A bullet thudded through the blanketed cot.

Twice more Dutch Von Bemmel pulled trigger, obviously spacing his shots to make sure of his kill.

A tense silence followed. Then Morgan heard the rasp of Von Bemmel's gun sliding back in its holster.

"That cut out Morgan's snorin'!" chuckled the freight boss. "Come on, *amigo*. Let's rattle our hocks out of here."

Before Morgan could get back to the front of the building, Von Bemmel and his accomplice had left the sheriff's office and vanished for parts unknown.

Hunching down in the shadows for a five-minute wait, Morgan whistled again to his roan. The saddler moved away from the hitchrail and came trotting in his direction. As he reached Morgan the cowboy vaulted into saddle and rode off at a dead run in the direction of the ridge overlooking Lodefork.

He saw lights burning in Tol Hogan's home, and he waved a salute to Del Harmon and the bereaved Angie. It gave Morgan a warm feeling inside, knowing that love and devotion could exist in a town where there was so much of evil.

At the top of the ridge Morgan reined up to give the roan a chance to catch its second wind. Hipping around in saddle, the cowboy peered at the twinkling lights of Lodefork, realizing that his mission in the turbulent Border town was nearing its climax.

Then he dipped down the opposite slope, heading for the ravine where he had left Blue Hawk on their way into town earlier that evening with Dutch Von Bemmel and Hogan's corpse.

The Yaqui was waiting in the shadows when Morgan skidded the roan to a halt and stepped down from stirrups.

"We're headin' for Tinspout Pass, Hawk," Morgan said without preliminaries. "The Masked Rider has work to clean up tonight."

Blue Hawk's obsidian-black eyes flashed with anticipation as he saw Morgan unbuckle Midnight's *alforja* bags and take out the jet-black Stetson, black cape and domino mask which he donned when assuming his rôle of the "Robin Hood of the West."

Never before in their adventure-packed careers, Blue Hawk knew, had the Masked Rider ridden to right a more grievous wrong than that which menaced Lodefork's decent citizenry tonight.

196 Pages of Six-Gun Thrills—Featuring Three Top-Flight Novels by Charles Alden Seltzer, William Colt MacDonald and Bruce Douglas—featured in the February Issue of TRIPLE WESTERN—Now on Sale, 25c Per Copy at All Stands!

CHAPTER XIV

Treachery in Tinspout Pass

TINSPOUT PASS was an eerie, haunted wasteland as Jim Krain booted the heavy freight wagon up the twisting switchbacks of the Sacatone road. The moon was westering down a sinister black sky, reminding Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff of a dead man's eye. It's sepulchral glow made the Thundergusts seem as remote and sterile as the mountains of a dead planet, gilding rocks and brush alike with a play of deceptive light and shadow which did tricks to a man's imagination.

The gaunt old sheriff was taut, apprehensive. Wayne Morgan had warned him that the Phantom Forty-Niner would strike again somewhere along this road, and had whispered logical proof to back his hunch. In spite of himself, Stoneruff shared Morgan's views.

The very wind seemed fraught with evil. A premonition of disaster laid its chill fingers on the lawman's spine, reminding him that along this stretch of road the invincible Eagle-Eye Yorkup had met his doom. Tinspout Pass was lined with the graves of better men than he, who had attempted to escort bullion shipments across the summit in the past.

The sheriff's increasing suspense transmitted itself to his pot-bellied deputy, busy handling the lines of the six-horse team.

"We're a couple of lunatics, Boss!" Jim Krain said sullenly, kicking his brake pedal as the Conestoga lurched around a hairpin bend at the summit. "Here's the county line. You and me got no business riskin' our hides in Sacatone County."

Stoneruff chewed at his tobacco-stained mustache and nodded glumly, his scrawny form swaying astraddle the bullion crates stowed behind the driver's seat.

"I did it for Tol Hogan's sake, Jim," Stoneruff said wearily. "Him and the decent people who elected me to office."

Jim Krain glanced over his shoulder at the old law dog.

"Speakin' for myself, I claim that Ferg Mulkey should of drove this wagon tonight. He owns it."

Stoneruff spat a jet of tobacco juice over the tail gate.

"Mulkey's a spineless coward," snorted the lawman. "I'm glad Angie gave him his come-uppance tonight when she showed how she felt toward Del Harmon. If only Tol had lived to see their weddin'!"

Brake-shoes whined noisily on the big wheels as Krain sent the wagon down a long grade which skirted the base of a lofty cinder cone which dominated the Tinspout Pass divide. The deputy's eye caught sight of the dead *ocotillo* bush where the Phantom Forty-Niner had ambushed Cal Stagg and Eagle-Eye Yorkup earlier in the week. That seemed an eternity ago.

Some association of ideas must have occurred to Krain, for he asked suddenly:

"Wonder whatever become of Slim Jenson? Ain't seen him around town for several days."

Stoneruff made no comment. Hogan had explained the mysterious escape Jenson had made from the granary two nights ago, but Dutch Von Bemmel disclaimed any knowledge of his stock tender's whereabouts.

The Hogan & Mulkey bullion wagon was rattling through a cut between cactus-hung shale banks when a horse and rider appeared suddenly against the star-powdered skyline on the right side of the road. Kaw Stoneruff and his deputy spotted the horseman at the same instant. Both were momentarily paralyzed as they saw the rider's dramatic costume.

A green scarf mask, a rainbow-hued serape that bannered in the night wind, a cone-peaked Mexican sombrero with ball tassels dancing from the brim, and moonlight winking off the silver conchas and gold trim of the rider's *charro* pants.

"The Phantom Forty-Niner!"

Stoneruff gasped out the words as he whipped the stock of his shotgun to shoulder. Morgan's hunch had proved true!

Simultaneously, Jim Krain had hauled his team to a halt, dropping the lines to grab for his own shotgun.

The Phantom's jeering laugh reached them, as the outlaw reared his silver-trapped gelding dramatically against the stars. The ghost of Joaquin Murietta made no move toward the guns thrust in his scarlet waist band, as Stoneruff drew a bead on the outlaw's midriff.

STONERUFF'S gun-barrel was rock-steady as he pulled both triggers. The heavy recoil numbed the sheriff's shoulder and his view of the Phantom Forty-Niner was momentarily obscured by a white

smudge of gunsmoke. The sheriff lowered his gun and stared aghast as he saw the Phantom throw back his head and laugh into the night.

"You theenk the ghost of Joaquin ees afraid of the boolets, *no es verdad?*" jeered the deep Mexican voice. "Shoot as much as you weesh, senor!"

With a grating oath, Jim Krain raised his shotgun and squeezed triggers. Stoneruff's ears throbbed to the deafening blast of his deputy's scattergun. But the results were the same. At point-blank range, the Phantom Forty-Niner and his horse appeared completely unscathed by swarming buckshot. It was fantastic, impossible!

Swinging gracefully from ornately tapaderoed stirrups, the ghost of Joaquin Murietta stepped to the ground and with a movement too swift for the eye to follow, brought twin six-guns out of sash holsters.

"Manos altos, senores— hands up!" ordered the Phantom Forty-Niner, his voice taking on a raw edge. "I weesh the crates of *oro* you are carrying een thos' wagon, *si.*"

Stoneruff came to his senses then. Disregarding the guns jutting from the outlaw's fists, the old sheriff stabbed a hand toward the big Colt at his thigh.

Flame spat from one of the Phantom's .45s and a bullet thudded into the bullion crates between the sheriff's wide-spread legs.

"Get out of the wagon, *senores!*" ordered the Phantom, as Stoneruff shakily raised his arms skyward. *"Andale*— hurry!"

Deputy Jim Krain tossed his smoking shotgun into the wagon box and climbed hastily to the ground, followed by the trembling sheriff. A man couldn't buck a ghost.

The Phantom Forty-Niner skidded down the slope before the two lawmen, gesturing toward the wagon with his guns.

"Turn around!" he ordered. "Keep the hands high, *si!*"

Krain and the sheriff moved up to the Conestoga. The Phantom holstered one six-gun and reached out to lift the sheriff's battered old .45 from scabbard.

Then, ignoring the twin Colts in Krain's holsters, the Phantom lifted an arm and smashed the sheriff behind the ear with a gun barrel. Knocked cold by the treacherous blow, the Sheriff of Border County toppled between the wagon wheels and lay motionless, his face gouging the dirt.

Jim Krain lowered his arms and turned to face the outlaw. No trace of fear was on the deputy's lean face as he shot out a hand to slap the Phantom Forty-Niner on the shoulder.

"Bueno, amigo!" laughed the deputy. "Joaquin Murietta hisself couldn't have done any better!"

The masked outlaw bowed gravely, his eyes holding a glint of mocking humor.

"Muchas gracias, Senor Krain. When the sheriff wakes up I imagine the first thing he'll do will be to unpin his star and throw it as far as he can!"

The two laughed uproariously for a moment, then the Phantom lifted a gun to the sky and triggered three times.

"That'll bring the mules," commented the Phantom, climbing up into the wagon. "Give me a hand with these crates, Jim."

Krain climbed up into the Conestoga and tied his lines around the whipstock to prevent the team getting boogered by the approach of the mules. The deputy set his foot and hand brakes to hold the wagon on the grade, then straddled over the driver's seat to join the outlaw.

When the heavy Golderado-labeled crates had been pitched to the side of the road, Krain mopped his face with a bandanna and eyed the Phantom curiously.

"I was just askin' Kaw what happened to Slim Jenson, Boss," he said. "Didn't yuh send him over to Snakefang Peak the other night to transfer the other bullion to another hideout, in case the sheriff looked into that Morgan's story?"

Climbing down over the tail gate of the wagon, the Phantom shook his head slowly.

"I've got bad news, Krain. Cabral rode over to Jenson's camp yesterday, wondering if Slim got ideas of pulling a double-cross and making off with those fifty bars. He found Jenson's body—with an arrow driven clean through his chest."

Krain's jaw dropped. "And the bullion?"

The Phantom waved a hand in a vague gesture. "Gone. Along with Jenson's mules."

JIM KRAIN appeared stunned by the Phantom's disclosure. He climbed down off the wagon like a man in a daze.

"But—an Indian arrow!" the deputy sheriff repeated numbly. "There ain't any Indians in this part of Arizona that use a bow and arrow."

A thud of hoofbeats sounded down-

wind, and around the shoulder of the ridge came a lone rider followed by six mules laden with high-peaked *albarda* pack saddles.

Jim Krain was prying open a bullion crate when the mule driver hazed the pack string into the cut alongside the Hogan & Mulkey wagon.

It was Dutch Von Bemmel.

"The sheriff's dead—or sleepin'?" asked the Thundergust Freight Line boss, piling his hands on the saddle-horn and grinning down at them.

"I conked him," the Phantom said. "I thought it would be a good joke to let him spend the rest of his life wonderin' how I escaped his shotgun. If he ever guessed that Jim Krain loaded both guns with blank cartridges tonight he'd pass out for good!"

Dutch Von Bemmel dismounted and pulled the mules alongside the loaded bullion crates.

"Looks like this is the Phantom's last haul," Von Bemmel grunted. "Well, the main thing is that Golderado is busted and Allied can move into Lodefork now. And with Hogan dead, I'll get all of the freightin' business from here on. That helps make up for losin' Slim Jenson and the rest of our swag."

The Phantom knelt to unload gold ingots from the crate Krain had opened, passing them up to Von Bemmel to store in the mule packs.

"Come on, pardner—cut out the playactin'!" Von Bemmel said impatiently, as he saw the Phantom fumbling with the green mask which covered his face. "Sometimes I think you plumb love pretendin' yuh're Joaquin's spook."

"Yeah!" put in Jim Krain, with an annoyed oath. "Pull off that loco git-up and help load this *oro*. Yore Phantom days are finished as of now."

The Phantom stood up, fingering the knots which tied the green mask around his head. Suddenly he froze, staring off past Von Bemmel's shoulder.

Something in the outlaw's posture caused Von Bemmel to wheel around, hand dropping to gun-butt.

Bracketing the Phantom's horse on the cutbank, overlooking the wagon were two riders, limned sharply against the moon. One was an Indian astride a grulla pony, a single feather jutting from the bandeau around his forehead. The other was a majestic figure in black domino mask and bannering black cape, astride a magnificent black stallion which might have been sculped out of onyx.

"The Masked Rider!"

Timed with his gagged cry, Dutch Von Bemmel dragged six-guns from holsters.

The Masked Rider leaned from saddle and spears of orange flame spat from his guns then, answering Von Bemmel's shots.

CHAPTER XV

The Phantom Unmasked

DESPERATELY the Phantom Forty-Niner flung himself between the wheels of the Conestoga as he saw Dutch Von Bemmel's body jerk under the tearing impact of the Masked Rider's slugs.

Up on the bank, the Robin Hood outlaw was sliding from stirrups, holding his fire as he saw that the Phantom was kneeling beside the prostrate form of Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff.

Blood welled from Dutch Von Bemmel's bullet-butchered forearm and one of his guns slid into the dust. Numb with shock, the freighter saw the Phantom Forty-Niner scuttling under the Conestoga to put the wagon between him and the black-masked avenger who was coming down the slope toward the road.

Deputy Jim Krain clawed for a gun then, his body shielded by Dutch Von Bemmel. But a harsh warning from Blue Hawk, still mounted on his gray pony overhead, checked the deputy's draw.

"Lift the hands, senor!" warned the Yaqui, "or you die as Slim Jenson died!"

Jim Krain stared at the war bow in the Indian's grasp, saw that a steel-tipped arrow was notched on the bow string and leveled at his chest. The courage drained from the traitorous deputy then, and he fell back against the front wheel of the wagon, arms lifted in surrender.

Guns crashed behind the wagon as the Phantom opened fire, but the Conestoga protected the Masked Rider as much as it shielded the all-too-mortal body of Joaquin Murietta's "ghost."

Dutch Von Bemmel's senses revived sufficiently for him to snatch up a fallen gun as the Masked Rider reached the level of the road. For an instant the two faced each other in showdown.

"This is to square Tol Hogan's score, buskie!"

As he spoke the Masked Rider tripped gunhammers. Dutch Von Bemmel, his skull riddled with lead, slumped against the bullion crates, his boots drumming a brief tattoo on the dirt.

The Phantom Forty-Niner, crouched behind the big mudwagon, thumbed a shot at the Masked Rider's legs and missed as his Nemesis leaped up into the wagon out of the killer's range. With a scream of terror, the outlaw leaped to his feet and scrambled up the nearest cutbank, gambling on reaching the safety of the slope beyond the skyline.

"Hold it!" the Masked Rider shouted, standing erect in the wagon box. "I aim to take yuh back to Lodefork alive!"

Like a whiptail lizard the Phantom scuttled up the short declivity and scrambled to his feet on the skyline, realizing that escape on foot was virtually impossible. Whirling, the Phantom's guns chopped down in a last exchange of shots as he started to run.

Blue Hawk saw flame rip from the Masked Rider's .45s. The thunder of his shots volleyed in echo off across the Pass.

Limned against the stars, the Phantom jerked erect, clawing at the blood which gouted from bullet-holes spaced like a semi-colon in his throat. Then, unhinging at the knees like a puppet, the ghost of Joaquin Murietta toppled slowly forward to roll over and over down the slope, thudding to a dusty halt against a rear wheel of the bullion wagon.

Lungs heaving with a deep inhalation, the Masked Rider thrust smoking Colts into holsters and turned to wave to his Indian companion.

"It's all over, Hawk," the Robin Hood outlaw said wearily. "Take charge of the deputy. At least we'll have one candidate for hangrope for the sheriff to take back to Lodefork."

While the Yaqui was busy with the job of roping up the panic-stricken deputy sheriff, the Masked Rider unslung a canvas water bag from the Jacob's staff on the footboard of the Conestoga and sloshed its contents over Sheriff Kaw Stoneruff's bleeding skull. Not until the lawman had regained his full senses did the Masked Rider let him face his treacherous deputy.

"You, Jim Krain!" gasped Stoneruff. "You workin' hand and fist with the Phantom!"

Krain's lips twisted defiantly. "Yeah. And Dutch Von Bemmel broke jail tonight with the keys I give to the Phantom before he left town, Sheriff. We played yuh for a jughead from the beginnin'."

SHAKING his head confusedly, the sheriff followed the Masked Rider around the end of the wagon to where the Phantom Forty-Niner lay rigid in death, his sightless eyes staring up through the slits in his green mask.

"It's Fergus Mulkey, Sheriff," the Masked Rider said. Stooping, he pulled off the Phantom's mask, revealing the twisted features of Tol Hogan's junior partner. "He must have been on the pay roll of Arizona Allied, tryin' to force Golderado Coöperative out of Lodefork. He would have killed Tol Hogan long ago if it hadn't been that he fell in love with his partner's daughter."

Even with the Phantom Forty-Niner's identity revealed in death, Kaw Stoneruff stared as if he could not believe the testimony of his own eyes.

"But Ferg—was he the original Phantom, yuh reckon?"

The Masked Rider nodded. "He shore was—choosin' Joaquin Murietta's ghost as a means of strikin' fear into the California miners he robbed years ago. I imagine he came to Lodefork as an agent for the Arizona Allied combine because he stood to make more *dinero* than he would have as a highwayman in California. When he was ready to bankrupt Hogan and Mulkey and drag down Golderado along with it, he went back to his old rôle of the Phantom Forty-Niner."

The sheriff stared at the Masked Rider, comprehension dawning slowly in his befuddled head.

"Wayne Morgan told yuh . . . Morgan's yore friend?"

Jim Krain's hoarse laugh interrupted the sheriff.

"Wayne Morgan's stayin' in Lodefork—in Boothill, Sheriff!" the deputy gloated. "Dutch shot him while he was asleep in his bunk in yore jail tonight."

The sheriff's glance shuttled between Krain and the Robin Hood outlaw at his side. He saw the Masked Rider nod.

"Morgan may be dead," the mystery rider said with well-feigned grief in his voice, "but he won't be buried in Lodefork. I'll pick up his body on my way through the camp tonight, Sheriff, and give it a more honorable burial somewhere's else."

The sheriff rubbed his jaw, his mind struggling with a baffling galaxy of questions.

"Yuh knew Fergus Mulkey was the Phantom before yuh pealed off his mask!" Stoneruff said. "Why, Wayne Morgan had figgered out the same thing—he told me so tonight! He said that Mulkey was the only person in a position to slip Slim Jenson the key to the Hogan and Mulkey granary the other night, so Jenson could make his get-away. And Morgan said he believed it was Ferg Mulkey who tipped off Dutch Von Bemmel about Hogan's goin' to meet Morgan at the sawmill tonight!"

The Masked Rider smiled bleakly.

"Morgan's hunches added up," he said. "Did he tell yuh anything else tonight, Sheriff?"

Stoneruff looked up sharply.

"Yeah, by grab, he did! He said you knew where the Phantom—Ferg Mulkey, that is—had buried all the bullion he stole off'n the wagon here!"

The Masked Rider turned to point at the cinder cone towering above the Tinspout Pass road.

"Yuh'll find all fifty ingots buried up there with a goat's skull markin' the spot, Sheriff," he said. "It so happens that the Phantom didn't bury his loot there. My Yaqui pard, Blue Hawk, discovered Slim Jenson's cache and he put the gold there. Yuh can haul it over to Sacatone any time."

THE Masked Rider turned to stare at Dutch Von Bemmel's corpse.

"So that about winds it up, Sheriff," he said. "Von Bemmel was workin' in the interests of Arizona Allied along with Fergus Mulkey and Jim Krain. Their common goal was the ruination of Lodefork's independent miners and their families so the big combine could move in. If things had gone as they planned, the Phantom Forty-Niner would have gone out of existence with the killin' of Wayne Morgan in the jail tonight, and Mulkey and Von Bemmel would have got to be freightin' pardners with an iron-tight monopoly over all the business in Lodefork."

The Masked Rider and his Indian henchman climbed back up to where their horses waited, leaving the sheriff to take charge of his traitorous deputy.

KAW STONERUFF loosened Krain's bonds and, standing over the cringing man with a ready gun, forced his erstwhile aide to reload the bullion crates in the wagon.

As Krain sweated and grunted under the burden, Stoneruff glanced up at the two mystery riders as they tightened their saddle girths.

"I'm shore sorry the skunks killed Wayne Morgan tonight," he said with sincerity. "And I'd give my eye-teeth if you and Blue Hawk could come to Angie's weddin' to Del Harmon."

The Robin Hood outlaw grinned his thanks. The "killing" of Wayne Morgan, and their supposed disposal of his corpse preserved his secret from the Lodefork sheriff in logical fashion.

"It would be embarrassin' for you, Sheriff, explainin' why yuh was so friendly with the most-wanted owlhooter in Arizona," the Masked Rider reminded him. "Give the newlyweds our best wishes —and *hasta luego.*"

The Masked Rider reared his magnificent black against the stars and he and his faithful Yaqui reined about in the direction of the Mexican border.

Stoneruff snapped handcuffs on Jim Krain's wrists and the pair climbed into the waiting wagon.

With luck, they would catch the westbound train at Sacatone in time to load Golderado's bullion aboard it.

"Never thought I'd live to see the day I'd be in the Masked Rider's debt," the sheriff muttered. "But I reckon the honest folks in Lodefork will never forget the debt *they* owe to him and Blue Hawk."

The sheriff twisted in the wagon seat to stare behind him. He saw only the sprawled corpses of Dutch Von Bemmel and Fergus Mulkey, partners in outlawry who were reunited in death. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk the Yaqui had vanished over the ridge, riding to meet the unknown perils which were an integral part of their destiny.

Next Issue's Novel: LURE OF THE GUN TRAILS, by CHUCK MARTIN

The MARSHAL of

Farber swung back with his spare gun in his left hand, and Cran pulled the trigger

WICHITA

Swift and certain six-guns bring roaring justice to the lawless as Cran Bishop dons a wounded marshal's star to stage one range-shaking trail town cleanup!

CHAPTER I

Trail Town

CRAN BISHOP was about to shake the dust of Wichita from his boots when Big Mike Caddigan called to him from the Trail's End saloon. Bishop dropped his bridle reins and turned to face the man who had made himself the boss of the Kansas cattle town.

Mike Caddigan was six-feet-four, and he weighed two hundred and forty pounds. He bought and sold cattle, owned the Trail's End saloon, and the Rafter F cattle spread. When Big Mike talked, lesser men listened respectfully. Now he walked to the tie-rail and spoke to Cran Bishop who was cowboy from saddle to boots.

"I could use you, Bishop," the big man said bluntly, and he stared at Bishop with a possessive expression in his bold blue eyes. "I could mebbe so get you the job of town marshal!"

Cran Bishop was twenty-five, six feet tall, and proud of being his own man. He had come up the trail from Texas with a Uvalde herd, and had stayed on for the change of scenery. He too had blue eyes, and the same inborn quality of leadership so evident in Big Mike Caddigan.

"Tole Johnson is marshal of Wichita," he told Caddigan. "Only yesterday he offered me a job as his deputy."

"Johnson is quitting," Caddigan said

An Exciting Novelet by CHUCK MARTIN

coldly. "I'll name the man to wear his star!"

"I'm riding over to Dodge," Bishop said quietly. "I wouldn't suit you as marshal, and we both know it!"

Caddigan scowled and hooked both hands in his shell-studded belts. The man didn't stay long in Wichita who argued with Big Mike, and then Caddigan smiled frostily and shrugged his huge shoulders.

"So you're riding over to Dodge," he said. "Better stay there, Bishop!"

Cran Bishop tightened his lips stubbornly. He was Texas born, and a Texan went where it pleased him. He stayed as long as he wanted to stay, and pulled up his picket-pin when it suited him best. Then Bishop saw Tole Johnson coming down the board-walk from the jail which also housed the marshal's office.

Johnson was a tall, spare man in his late forties. He was of Swedish descent, and talked with a broad accent on those rare occasions when speech was necessary. The marshal was watching the burly man coming toward the saloon from the west end of town.

Cran Bishop leaned his back against the tie-rail and reached for papers and tobacco. The burly man was Sile Farber of the Rafter F, and a partner to big Mike Caddigan. Bishop dropped his half-rolled quirly to the dirt when he realized that the tie-rail would be the center of a trail-town drama. He was caught in the middle, and there was nothing he could do.

MIKE CADDIGAN stood at the east end of the rail, and Sile Farber stopped at the west end. Tole Johnson stopped not more than five feet from Cran Bishop; he touched a paper in his vest pocket as he spoke to Farber with the voice of authority. "Farber," he said, "you're under arrest for the killing of Sam Updike. You'll get a fair trial!"

Sile Farber wasted no time in argument. He pointed to Mike Caddigan with his left hand to throw the marshal off guard. His right hand whipped down and snaked his heavy six-shooter from the holster. The heavy weapon roared thunderously as Tole Johnson started belatedly for his law-gun.

The marshal grunted and was slapped into a turn by the heavy slug. He went to his knees, tried to raise his pistol, but Cran Bishop lashed out with his boot and kicked the gun from the wounded marshal's hand. Then he stepped squarely in front of Tole Johnson just as Sile Farber caught his bucking gun high and eared back for a follow-up.

"One side!" Farber roared. "This is between me and him!"

"Step aside!" a cold voice ordered bluntly. "Johnson asked for it!"

Cran Bishop shielded the wounded officer and raised his head to stare at Mike Caddigan. Big Mike had a six-shooter in his right hand. His slitted eyes burned savagely.

"The marshal is wounded bad, and he's unarmed," Bishop said quietly. "If either one of you wolves bust a cap now, it's plain murder!"

Several men came running from the saloon; other men were coming from the shops along the main street. Mike Caddigan grunted and holstered his pistol, but Sile Farber came forward behind his smoke-grimed gun. "I always finish what I start!" he said savagely. "One side, or I'll let you have it, cowboy!"

"You won't live long if you do!" a deep voice interrupted quietly. "I'm part of the law in Wichita, and my hog-leg is centered on your killing heart!"

Cran Bishop saw Sile Farber holster his gun, and turned to face the speaker. Bishop had recognized that stern deep voice. It belonged to Judge John Taylor who ran a General Store in Wichita, and was also Justice of the Peace. The Judge was tall and solid of build, in his early fifties, straight as a sturdy pine. A long cowhorn mustache, white as the snowy hair under his black Stetson, framed his generous mouth.

Sile Farber whirled on his heel and stomped across the board-walk. He shouldered between the swinging batwings, and Big Mike Caddigan followed without a word. Judge Taylor holstered his gun and spoke quietly to Bishop.

"Head and heels, cowboy. We'll carry him down to Doc Elliot's place. The marshal is unconscious!"

Bishop nodded and caught the wounded officer under the arms. Judge Taylor took the scarred boots, and they carried Johnson across the street to a little house surrounded by a picket fence. The door was being held open by a motherly-looking woman, and a rasping voice called from inside. "Pack the law into my office, gents. I heard the shooting!"

Cran Bishop backed up the three steps and turned carefully. They laid the wounded man on a low table. A small

angular man was laying out surgical instruments, and he told Bishop and Taylor to strip Johnson's vest and shirts.

"Hot water, Ma!" Doc Elliot shouted at his wife. "And lay out some clean rags for swabs!"

Judge Taylor was already obeying orders. Cran Bishop helped. Judge Taylor picked up a pair of scissors and ripped the garment.

"Get over there and wash your hands pronto!" old Doc Elliot roared.

"Yes suh, Doc," Bishop gulped.

Judge Taylor was washing his strong white hands in a stone basin, and he made way for Bishop. He dried his hands on a towel handed him by the doctor's wife, and Cran Bishop did just what the Judge had done. Then he returned to the table where the doctor was examining the wound.

"Harumph!" the old medico grunted. "He's shot high in the left breast, but it's a clean wound. He'll be laid up six weeks mebbe. Hold him here, cowboy. Hand me that probe, Judge!"

The marshal moaned softly, but the doctor worked with his tools and brought out a .45 slug with his probe and pincers. "Pass me that bandage, cowboy!" the doctor ordered. "You two stay right here to help me and ma put the marshal to bed."

THE JUDGE frowned as he eyed the five-pointed star on the wounded marshal's faded vest.

"Wichita needs a man!" Taylor said thoughtfully. "He'd have to be fast with his tools, and almost tired of living."

Cran Bishop listened mechanically. He avoided looking at the patient, but the doctor was glaring at him.

"There's one such in Wichita!" Doc Elliot said coldly. "He don't care much whether he lives or not, and I've been watching his hands. There's your maverick, Judge!"

Cran Bishop raised his head and saw the doctor pointing at him. His bronzed face twitched angrily, but the doctor glared right back and went on with his bandaging.

"To heck with this town!" Bishop heard himself shout, and then he flushed and apologized to Ma Elliot. "Beggin' yore pardon, ma'am," he murmured. "But when a trail-town like Wichita lets a killer like Big Mike Caddigan rod the whole show, kill off the law and get away with it, I'm doing what I was doing when this go-around started."

"Such as what?" the doctor demanded.

"Shaking the dust of Wichita off my rigging and gear, and shagging down the trail to Dodge!" Bishop blurted. "I was standing right there when Tole Johnson told Sile Farber he had a warrant for his arrest. Farber and Big Mike had Johnson between a cross-fire, and Farber shot a hole right through that warrant!"

"And what was you doing all this time?" Doc Elliot demanded waspishly. "You carry that cutter just for an ornament?"

"Listen, Croaker!" Bishop answered angrily. "I'm just a Texas cowhand minding my own business. I'm not any part of the law in Wichita!"

"You heard what I said, Judge," Doc Elliot continued. "Now you take a young feller who's been disappointed in love. He don't care whether the sun rises or the moon sets. He's your cookie, Judge. He says he ain't any part of the law here in Wichita!"

"Listen to me, Bishop!" the Judge said sternly.

Cran Bishop turned resentfully to face the white-haired Judge. Taylor was studying him closely, and he nodded his snowy head.

"I stopped a killing back yonder," Taylor said bluntly. "Like as not I stopped two killings. You were protecting the marshal, and Big Mike had you under his smoke-pole. Right?"

"I'd do as much for any feller in a tight," Bishop answered angrily.

"Answer my question!"

"You had Big Mike under your cutter," Bishop admitted with a scowl.

"Yeah, and Sile Farber had you under his, and the hammer eared back to go," Judge Taylor said caustically. "Farber boasts that he always finished what he starts, and he meant to finish poor Tole yonder. Big Mike practically runs this town, and him and Farber are partners. Somebody ought to serve that warrant on Farber, but like Doc allowed, it would take a real man."

"Don't bait the boy, Judge," Ma Elliot interrupted.

Cran Bishop stood up and thrust out his stubborn chin. He faced Judge Taylor and hooked his left thumb in the armhole of his vest.

"All right, Judge," he said. "Pin it there, recite the oath of office, and I'll serve that warrant on Sile Farber!"

CHAPTER II

The New Marshal

RINK PARDEE was tying his horse and his daughter's in front of Taylor's store. He swung around at the girl's gasp of surprise. Shirley Pardee was a pretty brunette, and old Rink's only child. The girl was staring at a tall cowboy who was untying his horse from the rail in front of the Trail's End saloon.

"It's Cran Bishop, Dad," the girl murmured, but her deep voice held a startled note. "He's wearing a law-star, and that means he must have listened to Big Mike Caddigan!"

"Pay him no mind," the old man told her irritably. "I was glad when he rolled his soogans and quit the Half Circle P. Now I know we don't want no part of him!"

Cran Bishop mounted his horse and rode to the long jail. He swung down again, started into the marshal's office, and stopped suddenly when he saw Shirley Pardee watching him from the sidewalk in front of Taylor's Store. Then he tipped his gray Stetson politely, and went into his new office.

Shirley Pardee frowned and then crossed the walk. Bishop had taken a seat behind the scarred oak desk, and he glanced up from a paper when her shadow darkened the doorway. He was on his feet at once, hat in hand, but his face was not friendly as he waited for Shirley to speak.

"I'm sorry you did it, Cran," the girl began. "Tole Johnson is honest, but Mike Caddigan appoints most of the deputies!"

"Something wrong with your eye-sight, Miss Shirley," Bishop answered stiffly. "I'm not a deputy marshal!"

Shirley Pardee jerked up her head, and then crossed the room. She leaned over to read the badge on Bishop's vest, and her bewilderment increased.

"I don't understand," she whispered. "That's the marshal's star you're wearing!"

"That's right!"

"But what about Tole Johnson? At least Mike Caddigan couldn't buy him!"

"Tole Johnson was shot this morning by Sile Farber," Bishop explained briefly. "Doc Elliot and Judge Taylor are two of the trustees, and they appointed me marshal until Tole gets well. Can I do something for you?"

"You can do something for me, cowboy!" a harsh voice interrupted. "Stay away from the Half Circle P!"

Cran Bishop turned and faced Rink Pardee. The old cattleman was also a Texan, but he was of medium height even in his spike-heeled boots. His gray eyes glared at Bishop who smiled and shrugged carelessly.

"I'll stay away from the Half Circle P unless official business takes me there," Bishop said gruffly. "I'm the marshal of Wichita, and I don't work for big Mike Caddigan!"

"You—wait a minute!" Pardee stammered. "You say you're the marshal?"

"Tole Johnson was shot this morning by Sile Farber," Shirley explained. "Judge Taylor and Doctor Elliot appointed Cran to act as marshal until Tole has recovered."

"What about Big Mike?" Pardee demanded. "He offered you a job as Tole's deputy."

"Which same I turned down," Bishop answered stiffly. "Now if you will excuse me, I've got work to do," and he picked up the soiled warrant.

"Hold on there, cowboy," Rink Pardee blustered. "Looks to me like that warrant was punctured with a bullet. Where you aim to go?"

"Law business, and none of yours," Bishop answered gruffly. "I'll stay away from the Half Circle P, and good morning to you both!"

He jammed his Stetson down hard to shade his smouldering eyes, shaped the brim with the palms of his hands, and twitched the heavy six-shooter in his holster.

THEN he brushed past Shirley Pardee and her father, walked stiff-legged down the board-walk with his spurs chiming, and shouldered between the swinging doors of the Trails End saloon.

Big Mike Caddigan was standing at the far end of the bar, but Sile Farber was not in sight. Several drinkers glanced at Bishop and snugged closer to the bar. Mike Caddigan spoke sharply.

"You lookin' for someone, cowboy?"

"Marshal Bishop to you, Caddigan," Bishop answered quietly. "I'm looking for Sile Farber!"

"Him and me are pards," Caddigan answered insolently. "Won't I do?"

"You won't do," Bishop answered shortly. "Tell Farber I'm looking for him!"

'Better shuck that law-star and ride out of town, Bishop," Caddigan advised grimly. "I offered you a job and you turned it down. Mebbe you think you can buck Big Mike Caddigan?"

"Yeah, I think I can," Bishop answered, and his voice had taken on that unmistakable authority that comes only to those who rod the law. "Just tell Farber I'm going to serve that warrant on him!"

"Sile will be here at high noon," Caddigan said coldly. "I'll tell him you'll be here!"

"Thanks for nothing," Bishop murmured, and turning his broad back, he walked slowly from the room.

He frowned when Rink Pardee stepped away from the rail and intercepted him. The old cattleman looked worried as he tugged on his long mustaches.

"Don't go to fighting your head like a fool pilgrim, Cran," he said irritably. "You're just trying to get yourself killed!"

"Look, Mister Pardee," Bishop answered coldly. "I'll take care of my own business in my own way!"

"Never call a cowboy Mister unless you want to buy a bundle of misery," the old cattleman growled.

"You ain't a cowboy," Bishop retorted. "I was just a cowhand on your spread, and I was put in my place. Don't bother me unless you have official business with me!"

"I ought to part your hair with a whiffle-tree," Pardee flared angrily, and turning on one spike-heel, he walked rapidly to his horse. "He's going to barge in there and serve that warrant on Sile Farber at high noon," he blurted at his daughter.

"We've got to help him now, Dad," Shirley said slowly. "It lacks half an hour to noon, and perhaps you should speak to Judge Taylor."

"I'll see that he gets a fair shake," Pardee muttered angrily. "Not that he deserves it, but his dad and me were saddlepards down in Texas, the young idiot!"

Shirley Pardee shuddered. "That means you'll face the guns of Big Mike Caddigan," she whispered. "He's a cold killer, but he always proves self-defense!"

"Wait up or ride on home," Pardee growled, and he dragged his drop-shanked spurs as he headed for the Trail's End saloon.

Cran Bishop sat at his desk looking over some papers. A half-opened door separated his office from Taylor's store, and the new marshal frowned when he recognized Shirley Pardee's voice talking to Judge Taylor.

"You've got to stop him, Judge," the girl pleaded with Taylor. "He won't have a chance with Farber and Big Mike!"

Cran Bishop smiled coldly and stretched to his feet. Then he reached to a peg where he had hung the wounded marshal's gun-belt, strapped it around his lean hips, and fastened the tie-back low on his left leg. He wasn't a two-gun man, but Tole Johnson's gun would do for a spare. He drew his extra gun and checked the loads.

Bishop remembered the day he had delivered the remnants of his trail-herd to Mike Caddigan. Rustlers had stampeded the herd south of the Arkansas River, and after paying off his trail-crew, there had been only a few hundred dollars left. Of course he still had the old Box B ranch back in Uvalde, but even the Box B was mortgaged to the hilt to pay for his father's last illness.

Cran Bishop had been in Wichita six months, trying to find out something about his rustled herd. He had seen a Box B steer here and there in Mike Caddigan's shipping corrals, but Big Mike bought and sold cattle for cash. Strays on the open range were bound to join up with a trail herd, and Mike Caddigan was shrewd. He was also the boss of Wichita, and partner to Sile Farber of the Rafter F.

BISHOP forgot about Shirley Pardee as he glanced at the old clock on the wall. It lacked a minute or two to high noon, and there was work to do. The young marshal left the office, and faced west; and then he saw Mike Caddigan standing at the corner of the saloon.

Another man was dismounting from his horse, and Bishop stiffened as he recognized the solid bulk of Sile Farber. Caddigan said something to Farber, and the Rafter F owner faced around with both hands shadowing his twin six-shooters. The saloon doors opened out, and Rink Pardee stepped to the walk and faced big Mike Caddigan.

Sile Farber started walking toward Bishop who matched the cattleman's stride. Mike Caddigan shifted his position with his right hand on his gun. Rink's rasping voice warned him.

"It ain't your put in, Caddigan. This time I'm siding the law!"

Cran Bishop heard, but he was watching Farber. The stocky cattleman stopped

and went into a crouch. Bishop spoke sternly.

"You're under arrest for resisting arrest, and assault with a deadly weapon, Farber. I'm taking you for the law!"

Sile Farber skinned back his thick lips to show long discolored teeth. He went for his twin guns without warning, but Bishop had been watching those blocky hands.

The marshal lifted his gun with a smooth pass, and his thumb notched back his hammer as he drew. Then that .45 Peacemaker roared throatily, and Sile Farber was slapped to the right with a slug through the upper arm.

Farber stopped his turn, and swung back with his spare gun in his left hand. This time Cran Bishop caught him in his sights, pressed trigger, and Farber did a back flip that landed him in the dust under the tie-rail.

Bishop jerked around to face Caddigan. Big Mike was reaching high with both huge hands, while waspy Rink Pardee leaned against the gun pressed into the big man's spine.

"Thanks, Rink," Bishop murmured. "You want some, Mike?" he asked the scowling Caddigan.

Mike Caddigan relaxed and shook his head. His beefy face twitched as he watched Sile Farber struggle to a sitting position. Farber's thick arms hung uselessly at his sides, with trickles of crimson staining his splatted fingers.

"Not now, Bishop," Caddigan refused the challenge. "Looks like you win this go-around with what help you had. I'll deal the next hand!"

He turned abruptly and stamped into the saloon. Cran Bishop walked forward and helped Farber to his feet. He steered the bulky man across the street to where Doctor Elliot was waiting with his instruments. Then another voice spoke softly.

As he entered the doctor's office, Cran Bishop opened his mouth, and then stared at Shirley Pardee. The girl was wearing a white uniform, and Bishop remembered that the doctor had trained Shirley to help him care for the sick and wounded. "I'm helping the doctor, Cran," she explained. "I'm glad you didn't kill Farber!"

"Don't just stand there, Marshal!" the little doctor roared. "Strip that gunnie down to his middle, and then you wash your hands!"

"Yes suh, Doc," Bishop murmured, and he slit Farber's shirt with his knife. He shuddered when he saw the ugly wounds in the cattleman's arms, and then Cran Bishop shrugged and walked through the front door.

"Come back here!" Doc Elliot shouted. "You've got to hold him down!"

Cran Bishop made no answer. He walked across the street, entered the marshal's office, and took the warrant from his vest pocket. After making a note on the warrant, he drew his six-shooter, ejected the spent shells, thumbed fresh cartridges through the loading gate, and snugged the heavy weapon deep in holster leather.

He glanced up warily when the side door opened from John Taylor's general store.

"I want to commend you on your work, Marshal," Judge Taylor said quietly. "I was watching from the store, with a shotgun ready to go. Three of Sile Farber's cowboys were about to horn in to help the man who pays them their wages. You've got to be more careful."

"Thanks, Judge," Bishop said shortly. "I played them the way they were dealt because I had both Farber and Caddigan in the open. I'll take care of myself, don't worry."

"About Mike Caddigan," Taylor said thoughtfully. "Don't make a play for him unless you've got air-tight evidence. He's smart, has plenty of sand, and can call his shots!"

"So I'll try to get some evidence," Bishop said gruffly.

"You won't live long enough unless you show some savvy," a rasping voice interrupted from the front door, and Rink Pardee stepped in from the boardwalk. "You might watch the cattle coming in for shipment from the Rafter F!"

"I've been watching," Bishop surprised the little cattleman. "Can I count on your help?" he asked bluntly.

"I'm not the law," Pardee answered roughly, and then he leaned forward to study the young marshal's rugged face. "What's on your mind?" he asked curiously.

"Shipping brands!" Bishop said shortly. "Being town marshal, I'll have to work mostly in town!"

"You haven't given up about that trail herd you brought up from Uvalde, have you?" Pardee asked. Then he half-promised, "I always help the law whenever I can."

CHAPTER III

The Ghost

CRAN BISHOP was working late in his little office. He was studying the wanted posters, and smiling grimly. Mike Caddigan carried a dozen men on his payroll, and six more on the Rafter F. He alternated the men between the shipping corrals and the cattle ranch, and Bishop recognized the pictures of four men on posters taken from the files.

The men were wanted for rustling in Texas, but that meant little in Kansas. There was Shorty Yates and Lefty Hightower. They worked for Sile Farber on the Rafter F, and both were shifty with their six-shooters. Joe Tolliver and Slim Yancey were cowhands who worked at the loading corrals in Wichita, and took their orders from Big Mike Caddigan.

Bishop was scanning a little book which might have belonged to a cattleman. Tole Johnson had made a record of brands, and had kept a partial tally. As Bishop studied the figures, he understood why Caddigan had decided to kill the former town marshal. There were some notes about the Box B trail remnant, and Johnson had also done some arithmetic of his own. He had used the old familiar fence-rail pattern with four straight lines down, and one across for a block of five. Johnson had also made a notation in one corner which interested Cran Bishop. Above the new figures was the brand, Rafter F.

Bishop tucked the tally book in an upper vest pocket and turned the coal oil lamp low. The shades were drawn on the windows, and the hour was close to midnight. There was silence in the jail office for a time, and then the stillness was shattered by the roaring blast of a six-shooter. The figure jerked spasmodically at the marshal's desk, and sagged to the floor.

Running boots sounded on the boardwalk, and a moment later a tall lanky cowhand crept through the back door of the Trails End saloon. Mike Caddigan looked up from the bar, jerked his head and pointed to a bottle at his elbow.

Lefty Hightower poured a drink and downed it neat. Big Mike raised his bushy eyebrows questioningly, and Hightower nodded his bullet head.

"Got him center," he whispered huskily. "Wichita needs a new marshal!"

The front doors parted and a short-legged cowboy made his way back to Caddigan and Hightower. Caddigan indicated the bottle with a thrust of his chin, and Shorty Yates poured himself a generous drink.

"Nobody in sight," he muttered from the corner of his mouth. "But I saw Doc Elliot make a beeline for the jail. He ought to be along shortly."

The front door opened inward to admit the small figure of Doctor Elliot. The little medico stared at Caddigan and his two men, stamped to the bar, ordered a small brandy, and sipped it slowly.

"Howdy, Doc," Caddigan spoke affably. "What was the shooting about down the street?"

"Just some dry-gulcher taking a little practise," the doctor answered with a shrug of his stooped shoulders. "Are your guns clean, Mike?"

Caddigan scowled and touched his twin sixes with his big fingers. "Clean as a hound's tooth," he assured the doctor. "Who was the deceased?"

"I dunno," Dr. Elliot drawled. "I didn't find any body, but like as not it will turn up come daylight!"

A dry rattling cough sounded from the back room near the alley door. Shorty Yates turned his head, stared for a moment, and the color drained from his blocky face. He closed his eyes and blinked rapidly, and then looked again.

"Jeez!" he gasped hoarsely. "It's his ghost!"

Mike Caddigan smiled indulgently. "You've been hitting the bottle too hard, Shorty," he chided. "I don't believe in ghosts!"

Lefty Hightower stared at Yates and poured a stiff drink. He downed it hastily before turning his head, and then he gasped and turned slowly.

"It's the marshal," he muttered. "It's the ghost of Cran Bishop in the flesh!"

"Yeah," Doc Elliot interrupted harshly. "Your gun is all over powder-grime, Lefty. You shot Cran Bishop!"

BIG Mike Caddigan listened and turned slowly. His eyes widened when he saw a tall figure dressed entirely in white. There was an unearthly glow coming from the bony face, and the hand that held a cocked six-shooter also glowed with an eerie light.

"You're dead!" Hightower screamed hoarsely. "I ain't afraid of a dead man!"

"How do you know I'm dead?" a deep

hollow voice demanded. "Did you kill me, Lefty Hightower?"

"I killed you!" Hightower shouted.

"You're under arrest," the ghostly figure said sternly. "Anything you say will be used against you!"

Shorty Yates crouched forward, and then he made a sudden stab for his holstered six-shooter. As the weapon cleared leather, the six-shooter roared thunderously in the back room. Shorty Yates was slammed against the bar before his thumb could ear back his trigger, and he slumped to the sawdust with a crimson banner spreading in the folds of his dirty gray shirt.

The ghostly figure started forward, and Mike Caddigan stared through slitted eyes. Now he could see the figure more clearly, and Caddigan sneered when a sheet dropped to the floor. But there was nothing ghostly about that cocked six-shooter, and the voice was unmistakably that of Marshal Cran Bishop.

"I'm taking your gun, Hightower," Bishop said slowly, and all the hollowness was gone from his stern voice. "I'm arresting you for attempted murder, and holding Shorty for assault against the law!"

"Don't touch me!" Hightower whispered shakily. "I saw you fall with four slugs in yore chest!"

"Nuh uh," Bishop contradicted gruffly. "I had an idea Big Mike would make some such a play, but you ruined those two pillows I stuffed into one of my old shirts. I saw you legging it up the alley after the shooting, and I made out a warrant for your arrest. You coming peaceful, or do I buffalo you between the horns and drag you back to jail?"

Lefty Hightower turned to Caddigan and spoke jerkily. "You going to stand for this, Big Mike?" he asked, but his voice trembled.

"Leave me out of it," Caddigan answered gruffly. "I'll get you a good lawyer when your trial comes up, but I don't know anything about the shooting!"

"Better talk, Lefty," Doc Elliot suggested. "You'll get at least ten years in prison, while the man who hired you enjoys the fat of the land!"

"Pay that croaker no mind, Lefty," Caddigan warned Hightower. "You ain't in prison yet!"

"You take care of Shorty, Doc," Bishop told the little doctor. "I threw off my shot and got him high in the right collar bone. I'll take Lefty Hightower down to the jail, and maybe he will try to escape!"

Mike Caddigan shrugged and poured a drink with a steady hand. Cran Bishop jerked his head toward the front door, and Lefty Hightower obeyed the gesture. He did not speak until Bishop had locked him in a cell, and was wiping his face and hands with a neckerchief.

"That shiny stuff?" Hightower asked slowly. "Made you look like a corpse."

"Phosphorous," Bishop explained with a cold smile. "I dumped a box of matches in water, and rubbed them on my face and hands. How much did Caddigan pay you to rub me out?"

Hightower laughed shortly. "I'm not talking," he answered stubbornly. "And you won't hold me long in this jail!"

Bishop shrugged carelessly. "Big Mike will have you killed, Lefty," he answered slowly. "Big Mike knows you'll talk, and you know too much. I might get you off with a light sentence if you want to talk with your mouth wide open!"

"Ten years," Hightower whispered huskily. "How much lighter?"

"You'd mebbe-so get a year," Bishop answered earnestly.

"Tole Johnson knew too much," Hightower answered sullenly. "We saw him snooping around the Rafter F, and at the loading corrals. He was making marks in a little book, and Big Mike didn't like it none!"

"You mean he was getting evidence about rustling," Bishop stated positively.

"Look, Bishop, I don't want to rot in prison," Hightower whispered. "Is that straight about me getting off with a year if I talk?"

Cran Bishop nodded. "My word for it," he said quietly.

"Joe Tolliver and Slim Yancey," Hightower whispered. "Checkers down at the loading yards!"

CRAN BISHOP heard a slight scraping noise against the back wall of the jail. He raised his head to stare at the little barred window, and then threw himself sideways and down just as a six-shooter roared like a cannon. Bishop scooped his gun from the holster and triggered a point shot at a blot in the window, and then a body crashed as a ladder slid against the rough brick walls.

Bishop got to his feet and raced out the back way. He had to fumble with the chain which bolted the door, and a horse

galloped into the night before he got the door open. Then he was racing around the building to the side where a huddled heap was lying on a makeshift ladder.

Bishop took one look at the bushwhacker's face in the faint light of a sickle moon. The eyes were staring and glassy, and a black hole glared back at him from the dead man's forehead like a third eye.

Cran Bishop shuddered slightly and retraced his steps. The dead man was Joe Tolliver, one of the two Lefty Hightower had named. Acrid powder smoke hung thick in the cell block, and Doc Elliot came through the office while Bishop was fitting a key to the cell door.

"You all right, Marshal?" the doctor called in his harsh strident voice.

"Yeah, Doc," Bishop answered brusquely. "But my prisoner was shot through that little window. You better take a look!"

He opened the door and stood back to admit the doctor. The little medico cleared his throat of smoke and bent down to feel for a pulse. He straightened slowly, shook his head, and came into the corridor.

"Shot through the heart," he said tonelessly. "Who did it?"

"You're the coroner," Bishop said gruffly. "I got the bushwhacker; you'll find Joe Tolliver outside under the window!"

"You mean he didn't wing you?" Dr. Elliot demanded.

"He didn't have time," Bishop answered with a sigh. "I'd just made a deal to get Hightower off with a year in prison if he talked!"

"He won't talk now," the doctor growled. "Did he talk before he cashed his worthless chips?"

"He didn't say much, but he named Tolliver and Slim Yancey," Bishop answered honestly. "Yancey got away on a fast horse, and I didn't even see him!"

"Cran!" a girl's voice called anxiously. "Answer me, Cran!"

"He's in here, fit as a fiddle, and I told you to stay with the patients!" Dr. Elliot answered sharply, and he winked at the young marshal.

Shirley Pardee pushed past the doctor and ran to Bishop. She took his two hands and gripped them tightly as she searched his sober rugged face.

"I thought they had got you this time, Cran," she said softly, and winked a tear from her brown eyes.

"Well, thanks for caring," Bishop said slowly, but he refused to meet her eyes. "You better go now, Shirley. These two won't need any nursing!"

"I'm worried about Dad, Cran," the girl whispered. "Won't you ride out to the Half Circle P with me?"

"Rink Pardee told me to stay away from the Half Circle P, but I'll go now that you've asked me," Bishop replied ungraciously. "I'll saddle up and meet you at Doc's!"

CHAPTER IV

Night Herders

SHIRLEY PARDEE was waiting when Cran Bishop rode up to the doctor's house. The first thing she noticed about the young marshal was the badge on the left side of his vest, reflecting the light from the waning moon. A rifle was snugged under Bishop's left saddle fender, and occasionally his fingers would touch the handles of his six-shooters.

The Half Circle P was four miles west of Wichita, adjoining Sile Farber's Rafter F spread. Shirley tried to make conversation during the ride, but Bishop remained grimly silent or answered in monosyllables.

"You used to like me, Cran," the girl said wistfully. "Then you and Dad got to quarreling."

"Yeah," Bishop answered bitterly. "I started from Uvalde with twelve hundred Box B steers, mostly three-year-olds. I had less than two hundred when we reached Wichita; they brought enough from Mike Caddigan to pay off my trail-crew. If Rink Pardee lost all his shippers, he'd know how I felt!"

He didn't add that Shirley had been loyal to her father; had shown her displeasure when Bishop had stoutly maintained his position. He had spent most of his off-time during those first five months, trying to learn something about his missing shippers.

Cran and Shirley were crossing the ford at Eagle Creek when Bishop first heard the rumble of hoofs and the clash of horns.

"Follow me and don't argue!" he told the girl sharply. "I want to stay under cover and take a look at the herd coming this way from the Rafter F!"

"But I'm worried about Dad," Shirley Pardee protested.

"So am I," Bishop said gruffly. "This trail-herd might have something to do with your father!"

Bishop left the trail and rode into the deep brush. Shirley Pardee followed unwillingly, and she frowned when Bishop rode well back, dismounted, and tied his horse in a brush-screen.

"I don't want the horses to spook or whinny a warning," Bishop explained. "Now we can slip back there on foot and watch that Rafter F herd making the crossing."

Shirley Pardee shuddered as she crouched behind a grassy swale with the young marshal. The rumble of hoofs became louder, and the lead steers came into view with two riders in the point position. Shirley clutched Bishop's shoulder and spoke with her lips close to his ear.

"Those are Half Circle P steers in the lead, Cran. We didn't sell any cattle to Mike Caddigan this year!"

"Quiet!" Bishop warned sternly. "The brands have been vented out, and Caddigan's shipping brand is burned on the left hip. But look at those Texas longhorn steers coming across now. I'd know those critters anywhere without a brand!"

Shirley Pardee peered between the leafy branches to stare at the big rangy steers. There was no mistaking the wide spread of horns, and then she saw the Box B brand on the left shoulder. That brand also had been vented out, and Caddigan's Circle C burned on the left hip.

Cran Bishop was making a tally, and the girl could hear his muttered count. Bishop stopped at four hundred, and started another tally. This time he was counting Half Circle P steers, and then the last stragglers in the drag crossed the ford with three Rafter F riders following with their horses at a walk.

"Are you going to let them pass?" the girl whispered tensely.

Cran Bishop nodded and loosened the guns in his holsters. "Yeah, for now," he answered quietly. "We came out here to see if Rink Pardee was all right, remember? Looks like Caddigan must have him. We're riding to the Rafter F. Unless I miss my guess, most of the Rafter F crew are in that drive. Let's get back to our horses!"

SHIRLEY PARDEE seemed stunned as she followed Cran Bishop over the rangeland on trails she had never ridden before. Again he counseled caution as they reined to a walk, and Bishop pointed to the lights in a big house just ahead.

"That's the Rafter F ranchhouse, Shirley. I'm going to tie up here and circle for sign, and you cover my back. If I need help, you'll be my ace-in-the-hole. Follow me at a distance, and loosen your six-shooter just in case!"

He was gone before the girl could answer, and Shirley Pardee began to tremble. Here was a different Cran Bishop from the one she had known. He seemed like a cold but efficient fighting machine, and then she remembered her father. Not that Rink Pardee lacked nerve, but he was a small man, and not as young as the men who took Mike Caddigan's pay.

Cran Bishop circled the big house and crouched beneath a window on the left side of the big front room. He heard a mumble of voices, raised his head carefully to peer over the sill, and the blood began to race through his veins.

Rink Pardee was lying on the floor with his arms bound behind his back. His face was swollen and bruised. A larger man drew back his boot and kicked the helpless man in the ribs.

"You ready to sign that bill of sale for those five hundred Half Circle P steers?" the big man asked roughly.

"I'll see you in hades in your bare feet first!" Pardee snarled like a trapped wolf. "You and Caddigan might kill me, but the law will get you!"

"The law!" his tormentor sneered. "If you mean Cran Bishop, Big Mike will take care of him!"

Cran Bishop drew back when he recognized that sneering voice. It belonged to Slim Yancey, who had been with Joe Tolliver at the jail when Lefty Hightower had been killed.

Then Cran Bishop did a strange thing. He drew back and unpinned the marshal's star from his vest. After tucking it in a vest pocket, he circled the house and entered through the kitchen door. A moment later he crouched at the door leading to the front room, and drew his gun.

Slim Yancey was towering over Rink Pardee with his back to Bishop. He was bringing back his boot to kick the helpless man again when Bishop's voice stopped him.

"Don't kick, Yancey. Get those hands high!"

Slim Yancey stabbed for his six-shooter automatically. Bishop made a flying leap and lashed out with the barrel of his heavy forty-five. The blow caught Yancey on the side of the head, and the gun

flew from Yancey's fist as he sprawled to the planking.

Cran Bishop took his knife from the left side of his belt and leaned down to cut the bonds on Rink Pardee's wrists. Then he handed his six-shooter to the old cattleman and turned to face Yancey who was just crawling to his feet.

Yancey shook his head and made a savage rush when he saw that his attacker was empty-handed. Cran Bishop smiled coldly, side-stepped, and clipped Yancey as the tall cowboy was hurtling past. Then he followed him and ripped short blows to the body and face before Yancey could recover his balance.

"Pour it on him, Cran!" Rink Pardee yelled. "He roped me out of my kak, and like to beat me to death!"

CRAN BISHOP jabbed Yancey on the jaw with a straight left and brought a sweeping uppercut up from his boots. His right fist crashed against Yancey's jaw. The Rafter F man shuddered and fell face-forward.

"Cuff that prisoner, Marshal!" Rink Pardee shouted at Bishop. "I found a place where they are holding several hundred Box B steers!"

"I'm the law in Wichita," Bishop reminded Pardee quietly. "I've got no jurisdiction out here, but you lost about five hundred head of Half Circle P shippers tonight!"

A six-shooter exploded just as Bishop heard a shout. He had forgotten about Shirley, and he whipped into a turn with his left hand stabbing for his spare in the left holster. Then he lowered the gun to stare at Slim Yancey who was cradling a bleeding hand against his chest.

Shirley Pardee stood framed in the low window with a smoking six-shooter in her hand. Then Bishop saw the vicious two-shot derringer on the floor.

"He sneaked that hideout gun from his boot!" Shirley said in a trembling voice. "I had to shoot him!"

"You should have killed him!" Rink Pardee shouted hoarsely, and he stooped to pick up the small pistol.

Shirley was swaying, and her face had drained of color. Cran Bishop made a run and caught her, and his arms tightened around her slim figure and lifted her over the low sill.

"Thanks, Shirley," he whispered. "You saved my life when I got careless!"

Shirley Pardee shuddered and closed her eyes. "I never shot a man before," she whispered shakily.

"At least I had enough sense to keep an Ace-in-the-hole," Bishop said gruffly.

"We'll take this Gentle Annie back to jail," Rink Pardee interrupted, but Bishop shook his head.

"I'm not the law out here," he pointed out.

"That's all I wanted to know," Pardee said quietly. And picking up a catch-rope he began to build a loop. "This Yancey is a rustler, and I've got all the law I need!"

He flipped the noose and tightened it around the wounded man's throat. Slim Yancey stiffened and began to beg for mercy.

"I'm your prisoner, Marshal!" he bleated. "I'll ride to jail with you, but don't let him hang me!"

"You'll hang," Pardee promised grimly, and then he winked at Bishop. "How many head of my steers did your boss rustle from me?"

"Five hundred head!" Yancey answered desperately.

"And how many Box B steers have you been hiding back here on the Rafter F?" Pardee continued sternly.

"Must have been all of a thousand!" Yancey yelled, as Pardee tightened the noose with a gentle pull. "I'm bleeding out!"

"Keep on bleeding," Pardee said coldly. "You worked me over with knuckles and boots, but you're going to decorate a cottonwood!"

"Dad!" Shirley pleaded. "You can't hang him!"

Rink Pardee glared at his daughter and pointed to the door. "Outside, Yancey!" he ordered. "I aim to throw this rope over a limb, sit you on a Rafter F hoss, and slap him with my hat!"

"Save me, Marshal," the wounded rustler pleaded. "I'll talk. Big Mike is going to ship a trainload of steers early in the morning!"

Cran Bishop nodded and spoke to Pardee. "Look, Rink," he began. "We're all riding back to town. Slim Yancey is a free man, but if he rides into Wichita, I'll put him in jail. Looks like we might need a witness!"

"You heard the marshal," Pardee said to Yancey. "Or would you rather dance on air?"

"I'll ride in and surrender!" Yancey shouted hastily. "But you'll never take Big Mike alive!"

"Dead or alive, what's the difference?" Pardee asked callously. "Bishop has been on the prowl for going on six months trying to find out about his trail-herd, and now he knows. I'll watch this curly wolf, Marshal. You and Shirley get out to the barn and saddle a couple of horses for the ride back to town!"

Bishop nodded and left the room with Shirley. She caught his arm as they crossed the yard, and Bishop steeled himself for the pleading he expected. But Shirley Pardee tilted back her head and watched his rugged face set into a fighting mask.

"Cran," she said quietly. "Promise me you won't get careless again. Caddigan is a killer!"

Cran Bishop listened. Then he caught the girl in his arms and held her close. His lips found hers briefly, and then he pushed her away.

"That's a promise, Shirley," he whispered. "I won't get careless again!"

Then he was hurrying to the barn with his heart thumping against his ribs. Shirley called that she had found her father's saddle and bridle, and Bishop saw the Half Circle P horse in a stall. He saddled another horse for Slim Yancey, sent Shirley to bring in the two horses they had left outside the yard, and led the saddled horses to the big house.

Rink Pardee came out with Yancey, and they helped the wounded rustler to the saddle. Then Shirley rode up leading Bishop's horse, but Pardee left the rope around Yancey's neck and herded the prisoner into the lead.

"I'll get Doc Elliot and Judge Taylor," he said to Bishop. "You ride past the Half Circle P and rouse up my hands. Tell 'em to get fully dressed to earn fighting pay, and I'll meet you down at the jail!"

CHAPTER V

Trail's End

JUDGE TAYLOR sat saddle facing the posse in front of the jail. The white-haired old Jurist held a double-barreled shotgun in his capable hands, and little Doctor Elliot rode with another across his thin knees.

"We're cleaning up the town tonight," the Judge spoke grimly. "Take over, Marshal Bishop!"

Cran Bishop raised a hand and spoke quietly. "We'll surround the shipping pens, men. Give them a chance to surrender, but don't take any chances. Every one of them is a rustler or worse. Let's go!"

Like a grim Vigilante committee, the posse of twelve men rode in pairs down the wide dusty street. Cran Bishop glanced at his watch and said that it was three o'clock. The loading corrals were at the far end of town, and Bishop separated his men and sent them riding to surround the sprawling pens.

Cran Bishop's face hardened as he rode toward the Caddigan shipping pens. His right hand touched his six-shooter and his fingers tightened. After the roundup of Caddigan's crew, he would take a final showdown to Big Mike, the boss of Wichita.

Every man in the posse was armed with rifles and six-shooters. Shirley Pardee had stayed with Ma Elliot, and old Rink rode with Bishop. Doc Elliot and Judge Taylor rode just behind, and they could hear the bawling cattle as they came to the railhead.

Bishop could see men prodding steers into cattle cars in the yellow light from coal-oil lanterns. He called to the Judge and Doctor Elliot to cover him and Pardee, and Bishop rode right into the big yards. His badge of authority was pinned to his vest, and he could see the other members of the posse ride up as he entered the main pen.

"Hands up, cowhands!" Bishop shouted. "You're surrounded, and we'll kill any man who goes for his gun!"

"This sawed-off runs nine buckshots to the barrel!" Judge Taylor warned. "And I'm aching to trip both hammers!"

"Don't shoot, Judge!" a bearded man shouted. "We're only working for Farber and Caddigan!"

The posse closed in as the sweating cowboys gathered in a group. Cran Bishop rode forward and faced them with a cocked rifle in his hands.

"I know you all," he said quietly, and called off a list of names. "You are all under arrest, but you'll get a fair trial. Where's Big Mike?"

"Down at the Trail's End," the bearded man answered sullenly. "The rest of us were only working for wages!"

Cran Bishop turned to speak to Rink Pardee and Judge Taylor. The Judge said he would see that the prisoners were brought to the jail, and Bishop rode down the dark street with Pardee.

"This is different," Pardee argued. "Big Mike won't surrender, and he's fast with his tools. Wing the son and arrest him afterward!"

"Chances are he will be alone except for the barkeeper," Bishop answered quietly. "The law says every man is entitled to a chance to surrender. You ride up noisy at the front door, and I'll come in through the back to keep him honest!"

They separated at the corner with Rink Pardee trotting down the main street. Bishop cut to the left, and then turned into an alley. He dismounted, tied up his horse, and made his way to the back door of the Trail's End on foot. Out in front he could hear Rink Pardee's horse, and then silence.

BISHOP knew that Pardee was tying up at the rail, and he slipped through the back door of the dimly-lighted saloon. He saw the fat barkeeper with a shotgun in his chubby hands. Then he saw Big Mike Caddigan at the front of the saloon, crouching in the shadows, but facing the swinging batwing doors.

Cran Bishop drew his right-hand gun and waited. He heard the thud of boots as Rink Pardee crossed the boardwalk. Then the steps hesitated, and Bishop spoke sternly.

"Drop that gun, Caddigan. The law speaking!"

Big Mike Caddigan whirled savagely and triggered two wild shots at the dim figure in the back room. Cran Bishop fined his sights and shot once, and Caddigan screamed as the gun was torn from his shattered right hand.

A small figure made a sliding dive under the swinging doors, and a shotgun roared viciously from behind the bar. Then another sawed-off cannoned from close to the floor, and the barkeeper sagged on the mahogany.

Cran Bishop came down the barroom with his six-shooter ready for a follow-up. Big Mike Caddigan faced him in a crouch with his huge head sucked down between his wide shoulders. He faced Bishop with his left hand clawing at the spare in his open holster.

"Don't draw!" the marshal warned sharply. "You're under arrest!"

Mike Caddigan snarled like a wounded wolf and whipped up his spare six-shooter. Cran Bishop tightened his lips and his trigger-finger at the same time. He saw Caddigan jerk to the right as the heavy slug caught him high in the shoulder. It twisted him sidewise, but the big man did not go down.

Big Mike grunted and swung around slowly. His thick lips were skinned back over tightly-clenched teeth, like a maddened Grizzly that can take several bullets and stay on its feet to continue the charge.

Nothing but a vital shot would stop that inhuman hulk of destruction. There was no pity in Bishop's eyes as he lined his sights and placed his shot dead center. The gun roared thunderously in his hand, and Mike Caddigan took a backward step.

He fought to remain upright, and then the fingers of his big left hand opened spasmodically. The gun dropped to the splintered planking, and Big Mike swayed forward and broke at the knees. The bar shook as his massive bulk crashed to the filthy sawdust. Like the saloon he had owned, he had come to Trail's End.

Cran Bishop watched for a long time. Then he was aware of a movement along the wall, and he slowly turned his head. Rink Pardee was getting to his feet, and the old cattleman had his six-shooter trained on the hulk that had been Big Mike Caddigan.

"His kind die hard," Bishop heard Pardee mutter. "But this one won't crawl away to hide under a rock!"

The gun came up in his hand and centered on Caddigan's balding head. Then the big man's boots began to rattle a short vibrating tattoo. Rink Pardee lowered his gun and smiled foolishly.

"He's dead all over now, Cran," he said solemnly. "You better go out and talk to Shirley. I see her feet under the door."

Cran Bishop holstered his smoke-grimed six-shooter and left the saloon. A trace of daylight was showing off toward the east, and Shirley Pardee was facing him with her arms open. The marshal took a step and stumbled, and Shirley caught him and spoke softly.

"You are hurt, Cran. There's blood on your left sleeve."

Bishop shrugged and felt of his arm. "Just a scratch," he said, and then he shook himself. The dazed look of uncertainty left his face, and now the fighting mask was stripped away as he looked into Shirley's dark eyes.

"It's been a long day and night, Shirley," he said wearily. "But the job is done, and we can start another one."

"Cran, what do you mean?"

"My trail-herd," Bishop answered with a smile. "It was about all I had, and it took me six months to get it back. Now I can start raising cattle again. I'm going to be your dad's partner!"

"But you and dad were always quarreling," Shirley reminded, and it was evident that she was puzzled.

"Sure, but we won't be any more," Bishop answered happily. "You see, honey, he wanted to take me in as a partner, but I had very little money. He said I didn't need any, but I wouldn't play that way. Now I can buy a share and hold up my head!"

"You mean you two like each other?" Shirley whispered.

"Best prospective father-in-law a cowboy ever had," Cran Bishop answered. "You'll marry me, Shirley gal?"

"Oh Cran, yes," the girl whispered, and went into his arms.

"That's telling him," a laughing voice interrupted from just inside the saloon. "Don't let him get away this time, gal. I need that cowboy to help me do my chores!"

A group of horsemen rode down the street and stopped at the jail. Cran Bishop stepped up to Judge Taylor and held out his star.

"I'm resigning, Judge," he said respectfully.

"Not now you ain't!" the Judge refused coldly. "You took a swear to rod the law until Tole Johnson got up off of bedground. You've cleaned up the town right enough, but you passed your word. When's the wedding, and I'll officiate?"

Cran Bishop turned to Shirley. "You tell him," he pleaded.

"Tomorrow evening out on the Half Circle P," Rink Pardee interrupted. "Every one is invited!"

"Suit you, Marshal?" the Judge asked Bishop.

Cran Bishop nodded his head. "Suits me fine," he said happily. "When can I turn in my star?"

Doc Elliot spoke up in his harsh rasping voice. "About a month from today, cowboy," he said with a grin.

"Come and see me a month from today," Judge Taylor told Bishop with a smile. "And until then, you're the Marshal of Wichita!"

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By JOHNSTON McCULLEY

Danger and trouble come to a lone mountain telegraph post on the buzzard-like wings of a raging blizzard!

WHEN the telegraph sounder resumed its loud chattering, Eph Cartwright, railroad agent at Rock Siding, was in the little rear living room of the station starting to brew an enormous pot of black coffee. Though it would have been only sunset, had a man been able to see the sun, he had lit the lamps in the tiny station house. He would need the black coffee, he knew. There would be little sleep for him tonight.

For almost forty hours, the blizzard had been raging in the Nevada mountains. Railroad traffic was in a snarl. Some trains were so late they had been canceled. The telegraph lines had withstood the force of the storm so far, but might go down at any time.

The dispatcher at Sierra Grande, the nearest division point, was pounding his key continuously as he made a frantic effort to keep things moving. Though his own situation was bad enough, Eph Cartwright pitied the dispatcher, who carried a great weight of responsibility.

This winter was worse than last, which had been his first at Rock Siding, Eph thought. Yet he did not complain. He was glad the railroad had given him this little, lonesome post, where he lived alone, depended on the telegraph for gossip, and spoke seldom except to trainmen whose

trains took the siding there, a regular meeting point.

His tenure at Rock Siding had saved his life, he knew. The doctor at the division point hospital had told him as much. His lungs had been going. But this post gave him the pure thin air of altitude and work enough to keep his thoughts from growing morbid and to pay him a living.

And this post had made him acquainted with Mora Lansing, too. Her middle-aged father was the agent at Indian Bend, ten miles away. Eph had met her first at Sierra Grande, when he had gone to the hospital for a check-up while a relief man did his work.

THE attraction between them had been immediate and mutual. It had been an unusual courtship. Only occasionally did they meet. But twice each day they gossiped over the wire, and grinning friendly trainmen carried love letters between them and tossed them off as the trains sped past.

They planned to be married in the spring, if the doctors said Eph was well enough. Eph had been promised a better station when that happened. For he had made a good record at Rock Siding. It was an important post, especially in bad weather.

For miles, the great snowsheds twisted and curved along the side of the Nevada mountain range like a great serpent. The trains roared through them, partially protected from drifts that would have blocked progress, and disastrous snow slides from the slopes above.

There was always fear of disaster. A spark from a locomotive's stack might start flames which, wind-driven, would race through the sheds and imperil lives and property. A slide might block the track. So the tiny stations, not far apart, were links in safeguarding the trains. Dispatchers sighed with relief when a train passed safely over the division.

Eph realized the importance of his post, and his superiors at division headquarters knew it. They had hinted to him that better things were in store for him as soon as the doctors said he could handle them. So he looked into the future with confidence.

Now, as he thrust wood into the little cook stove in the rear room and put the huge coffee pot in place, Eph was listening to the chatter of the sounder. He heard the call signal for his own station, and hurried through the door to the telegraph board, sprawled in the big chair before it, reached for his key and acknowledged the call.

The dispatcher pounded out the message: R.S. PLOW HAS PASSED INDIAN BEND. MAY BE FOLLOWED BY NO. 8, WHICH WILL TAKE SIDING AT R-S FOR NO. 9, IF SHE CAN MAKE IT. MEET ORDER OUT.

Eph acknowledged, and the sounder was still. He guessed that the dispatcher at Sierra Grande was at the point of collapse from fatigue and worry. This last had been a sort of general gossip instead of an official-sounding bit of wire work.

Eph got out of his chair, stretched and yawned. It was time to light the switch lights, for it had grown dark outside. He bundled up as well as he could, thinking as he did so that it was fortunate a friendly brakeman had tossed off a bundle of old magazines a few days before. If he had to keep awake all night, reading matter and strong coffee would come in handy.

He gathered up the lighted switch lamps and hooked his own lantern over his left arm. As he opened the outside door of the little depot, a blast of the blizzard made the building shake and almost sucked Eph's breath from his lungs. He bent almost double to make progress against the force of the storm. Frozen sleet made footing precarious. He struggled to the first switch and got the lights into position securely. Any brakeman who had to open a frozen switch tonight would have a tough job, he thought.

AND another thought came to him at that instant. This would be New Year's Eve. Tomorrow, another year would start. He hoped that the end of it would find him married to Mora and in charge of a more lucrative station.

He must get her on the wire as soon as he got back to the depot, he told himself, and wish her a Happy New Year. Unless the dispatcher at distant Sierra Grande was pounding out emergency orders, the line would be clear.

He struggled on against the storm to the second switch. When the lamp was in position there, he turned his back upon the sleet-driving wind and hurried down the track, past the station, and to the other end of the long siding. It did not take him long to do his work there.

It was pitch black, and his lantern was a necessity, as he had known it would be. He had to face the storm again, and the force of it almost took his breath at times.

He slipped and stumbled through the drifts, breathing painfully. It was growing much colder. That might put an end to the sleet and snow, but not to the biting wind.

If the snowplow had left Indian Bend, as the dispatcher had said, it should be getting through soon, unless they ran into trouble. The plow would clear the siding as well as the main line, and if the eastbound limited, greatly delayed, was following, the plow crew would thaw the switches and make it easy for the train to take the siding.

Eph finally stumbled against the end of the depot platform. There was little snow on the platform or track in front of the depot, for the fierce wind had swept it clean, to pile it a short distance away across the siding.

Inside, in his little office, Eph stripped off his superfluous storm clothing and hurried into the back room, where he slept, cooked, ate and lived within hearing of the telegraph sounder.

The coffee was boiling. Eph filled a mug with the scalding liquid and put it to one side to cool off a bit before he started gulping it. He put more fuel into the cook stove, and carried a couple of chunks of wood to the stove in the office.

The sounder began clattering, and he hurried to the telegraph board. He knew the distant dispatcher's "hand." More orders or trouble, he supposed.

"All stations!" the wire was saying.

The others along the line began acknowledging. Eph heard Indian Bend acknowledge, and knew it was Mora at the key.

He acknowledged in turn, then waited for the message.

"All stations. Jud Marlin has appeared along the line. Broke into empty station at Pinecrest and used key to make threats. Be on guard. That is all."

Eph sprawled in the chair, sipping coffee, and looked through the window at the blackness of the night, relieved only by streaks of light from the office. The distant switch lamps were winking through the falling sleet.

He had no fear of seeing the evil face of Jud Marlin pressed whitely against the pane of a window. Pinecrest, where the outlaw had been reported, was twenty miles away.

Even a tough outlaw like Jud Marlin wouldn't make much speed on a storm-swept night like this.

MARLIN had been a railroad worker once, a rapid-fire telegraph operator. He might not have been tolerated on another division, but here in the mountains the railroad took what it could get.

Marlin was addicted to whiskey, and not in moderation. But he never forgot his work. However, he was uncouth and quarrelsome, continually fighting with trainmen, delighting in his physical prowess. And finally, after he had battered an engineer into insensibility and driven off the others of a train's crew with a gun, he had been discharged.

Instead of going to some other part of the country, Eph remembered, Marlin had remained in the mountain country and had turned outlaw. At every chance, he attacked the railroad, which he hated because of his discharge.

Railroad property had been damaged or destroyed. Huge piles of ties had appeared on the track in unexpected places, causing two bad freight wrecks. Railroad detectives and local sheriffs had failed to catch Jud Marlin. A posse had been formed to comb the hills during the autumn, after a disastrous snowshed fire set by Marlin, who always informed the railroad officials of what he had done. But Marlin had not been found.

It was thought he had fled the country because of the posse. But, according to this message of warning, he was present again, a bad man to have at large. He hated the railroad, and he knew railroad work, and how to attack and where least expected. If Jud Marlin was running wild in blizzard weather, he could be expected to commit almost any atrocity.

Eph Cartwright waited for a time until the line was clear, meanwhile getting warm and drinking hot coffee. Then he reached out and opened his key and called Indian Bend. The reply came at once, and by the "send" he knew Mora was at the key.

"This is Eph," he wired. "Hope you are keeping warm. I had a sweet time putting out switch lights."

"Wind abating here," she replied. "We will be up all night."

"Wish I could be there with you," Eph sent.

"Wish you could," Mora answered.

Eph could visualize her sitting at the key—a short, rather plump girl with a rosy face, black hair and eyes and a smile that seemed to be working almost always.

"Did you get the Jud Marlin message?"

"Got it," she answered. "Hope he does not drop in on us here."

"If he does, handle him rough," Eph sent. "Hope he does not drop in here either. Do not feel like showing hospitality. Did you hear him sending from Pinecrest?"

"Yes. Somebody flagged the limited there and they think he did it. He broke into the section house and got out a hand car and they think he went back the track after the plow and limited passed."

"Did not hear any of that," Eph sent. "Must have come over the wire while I was putting out switch lamps. By the way, Happy New Year."

"Same to you," she tapped in reply.

Eph heard a roar up the track, and a distant headlight flashed its streams of brilliance through the sheets of sleet.

"Snowplow coming," he wired her. "Must stop now. More later."

THROUGH the track window, he could make out that the plow was standing at the upper switch. They were opening it, he supposed. And a moment later he knew that guess was correct, for the plow turned into the siding and started clearing it.

Slowly, it approached the station, a rotary giant that could bite through the deepest drifts and make the passage of trains possible. It went past the station toward the lower end of the siding and out upon the main line after opening the other switch. Then it came back slowly on the main line and chuffed to a stop at the depot.

The snowplow crew tumbled into the little depot and began swigging Eph's coffee as they talked and stood around the stoves to get warm. They discussed the sudden and unexpected appearance of Jud Marlin.

"He probably backtracked with the hand car," one of the plow crew decided. "He'll leave it on the track, no doubt, for some locomotive to hit. Must have a hideout somewhere up in the hills."

"He can't get around much on a night like this," another said.

"Neither can the sheriff and his men," the first countered. "Hope they land him one of these days. Makes everybody along the line nervous to have him runnin' loose."

"It'll be a shootin' affair if they run into him," another of the crew declared. "They've got evidence enough to hang him —or anyhow send him to prison for a long term."

The men finally bundled up and went back to their rotary and started off down the line. Eph went to his key and reported the plow out and got the dispatcher's acknowledgment.

"Limited following plow from Indian Bend," the dispatcher sent. "See her yet?"

"Not yet," Eph replied.

He didn't try to talk to Mora again then, being afraid the dispatcher might want to get to work following the progress of the plow. So he went into the back room and filled the coffee pot again, stoked up the fire and got the coffee cooking.

Twenty minutes later, the limited whistled down the track. Through the window, Eph saw the train stop and turn into the siding as if intending to wait for No. 9 to pass. The train pulled up opposite the station, and the conductor came into the depot kicking snow and sleet off his boots.

"How far is the plow ahead?" he asked.

"Less than half an hour."

"We're stuck here for a while, then. No. 9 is waiting for the plow at Silver Creek. Take her some time to make it here and pass."

"Hear about Jud Marlin?" Eph asked.

The conductor gave voice to a burst of imprecations. "He, or somebody, got into the Pinecrest station and flagged us down," he reported. "Pure devilishness. Took us some time to call in and find we could proceed. Like to get a glimpse of that so-and-so, when I have a gun in my hand."

"Every railroad man would," Eph suggested.

The sounder began clattering; it was the dispatcher again. Eph took orders for the limited to proceed to Silver Creek behind the snowplow. No. 9 would wait for the passing there.

"Glad to be moving, anyhow," the conductor said, as he prepared to go back to his train, clutching the orders he had received. "Happy New Year!"

"Same to you, and many of 'em!" Eph replied.

The conductor hurried out. The locomotive's whistle called in the flagman. A few minutes later, the train started rolling. Eph watched the tail lights until they disappeared in the swirls of sleet and snow.

He checked on the fire and the coffee

and returned to the office room, rolling and lighting a cigarette. He was thinking of Mora again as he sat down before the telegraph board.

He knew that company officials considered his record good, that he was proper material for a bigger and better job. The next checkup by the railroad physician, he felt sure, would reveal his physical condition as good.

Perhaps he and Mora could be married in the spring, and then he would be assigned to a larger station, to some town where there were people around, life. Even a small town would seem like a metropolis after Rock Siding.

Now he sat before the telegraph board and bent forward to reach for the key. He called Mora.

"Plow and No. 8 have gone past," he told her.

"I heard the meeting order."

"Anything new on Jud Marlin?"

"Not a thing. He probably went back up the cleared line. Are you going to get to Indian Bend next week?"

"If the storm stops and traffic gets regular, I'll report off some evening and come back in the morning. Want to see me?"

"You know I do," she replied. "Wish you could be here for New Year's Day. We are going to have fried rabbit. One of the brakemen tossed some off."

"I have a chunk of venison myself," he sent in reply. "Maybe some day before long we will be eating together. Hope our plans for next spring work out."

"Good-night," she sent.

He answered and closed the key, leaned back in the chair and picked up his pipe instead of making another cigarette. He took his time about getting the pipe going, puffed in content, dreaming of the future.

AND suddenly the office door was pulled open. In it stood framed a huge man dressed in rough clothing, a muffler almost obscuring his face, his eyes gleaming. His gloves were off, and in his right hand he held a menacing revolver.

"Take it easy, key-pounder," the unknown visitor said. "Surprised to see me?"

"Who are you?" Eph demanded. "Where'd you come from?"

"Came to town on the limited. Conductor didn't know that, though. Rode free—all the way from Pinecrest."

"Pinecrest!" Eph exclaimed.

The visitor laughed. "I see you've been listenin' to wire gossip. Yeah, from Pinecrest. Had a little fun there. Broke into the station and cussed out the dispatcher. Hung out a red light and flagged No. 8. While they were fussin' around tryin' to figure out what was happenin', I got aboard without bein' seen. I know my way around trains. Got off when she stopped here without bein' seen, too. Knew she'd stop here. Listened to the wire at Pinecrest."

"You—you're Jud Marlin!"

"Yeah, that's right. Got a little business here."

As Eph stood like a man petrified by shock, Jud Marlin began removing his outside clothing. The muffler came down and revealed a bestial face covered with a heavy stubble of beard. Marlin's eyes were bloodshot. As he divested himself of his body's heavy wrappings against the cold, his eyes never left Eph for a moment, and the gun was always ready at his hand on the end of the telegraph board.

"I can use some of that hot coffee," Marlin said. "Walk ahead of me and get me some."

Eph obeyed because at the moment there was nothing else he could do. He filled a mug and put it on the table, and Jud Marlin sat down, gun still held ready. He lifted the mug and began drinking.

"Cook me a mess of eggs or somethin'," he ordered. "And make it lively. Haven't had anythin' to eat since early this mornin', and I crave vittles."

Eph got out supplies and put a skillet on the stove. He sliced some cold boiled potatoes and some bacon and broke four eggs into a dish.

"I heard you talk to your girl over the wire," Jud Marlin said, as he waited for the food to be prepared. "Gettin' married in the spring, huh?"

"That's right," Eph managed to reply as he worked.

"Then you'll get a bigger job and go right on workin' for this cussed railroad, huh?"

"That's the plan."

"Plans don't always work out," Jud Marlin reminded him. "I reckon I'll have to mess yours up. Ain't got anything against you personal, understand. It's the railroad I'm fightin'."

"What do you mean?" Eph asked, a note of alarm in his voice.

"Tell you later. Hurry with that grub. Got any whiskey?"

"A couple of gulps, maybe."

"Well, what are you waitin' for?"

Eph opened his little cupboard and brought out a flask and put it upon the table. Marlin held it up to the light.

"Only half a swaller," he commented. "All you got?"

"That's all. I seldom use it."

Marlin upended the bottle and emptied it at a gulp. "Anyhow, you won't be needin' this whiskey."

He crashed the bottle in a corner of the room as Eph put a platter of food before him. Marlin ate ravenously, with the gun a few inches from his plate.

Eph's mind was in turmoil. He was wondering what Marlin contemplated. Here was an emergency he never had expected to confront. Before him was the man who had been fighting the railroad, burning company property, wrecking trains, who had caused the serious injury of three trainmen.

It was Eph's duty to try to overpower this man, to make him a prisoner and turn him over as soon as help could get there. But Eph was a small man and had been going through a serious, strength-sapping illness. And Jud Marlin was a beast in size, strength and thought.

EPH had a gun, the same as any station agent, but it was in a drawer in the telegraph board, and he knew he never could get it without a shot from Marlin's weapon cutting him down. He didn't want to die a hero in making the attempt. That would not amount to anything in this crisis. It would mean Marlin's triumph. The only way Eph could triumph would be to overpower this man in some manner and turn him over for trial.

Marlin wiped the platter clean and swigged more coffee. Eph refilled the empty cup. Marlin borrowed Eph's tobacco sack and package of papers and made himself a cigarette, then thrust sack and papers into a coat pocket.

"I'm feelin' a little better," Marlin declared, "after that coffee and grub." He glanced through the open door at the clock on the wall above the telegraph board. "It's almost time," he added.

"Time for what?" Eph asked.

"Time to give this cussed railroad trouble they won't forget for years to come. All I've done before this has been little annoyin' stuff. I'll repay 'em for gettin' that posse after me! Got my plans all made. Been hidin' and waitin' for just the right time, and this is it."

"How do you mean?" Eph asked.

"Traffic's in a snarl. Everything's mixed up. I know how it is. I've set before a telegraph board all night listenin' to a crazy dispatcher tryin' to straighten things out."

"Yeah, things are sure bad tonight," Eph said.

"Now, I'm waitin' for that sounder to talk. It'll tell me what I want to know."

"What's that?" Eph asked.

"I want to know when the limiteds pass at Silver Creek, when the northbound starts in this direction. I know how long it'll take 'em to get here through the snowsheds over slippery rails. I know that northbound's got some high railroad officials on it. There'll be a few new board members after my work tonight."

"I don't see what you're drivin' at."

"Gettin' interested, are you?" Marlin asked. "Oh, I don't mind tellin' you! You'll never be able to repeat it. You just picture that limited comin' crawlin' slow up the long grade through the sheds 'tween Silver Creek and here. What you think'd happen if it met a snowshed fire, driven by this wind, rushin' straight at em? They couldn't run back fast enough to get away from it. It'd be on 'em almost before they knew it. No warnin', 'cause I'm goin' to cut the wires right on your telegraph board."

"Why—why—" Eph gulped. A picture of horror was forming in his mind.

"Yeah! The company's crack train will be burned. And the crew and passengers will be broiled, includin' them railroad big men. Easy to start the fire, too—and you'll be blamed. Nobody will know I've even been here. They may suspect, but they won't know."

"How'll I get the blame?" Eph asked.

"The fire'll start here, and folks will say you got careless with your stove or your pipe. All I've got to do is shoot down a lamp and move on and watch. I've got my getaway planned. I busted into the section house at Pinecrest, and they thought I got a handcar and rode away with it. But here I'll really do that. After the fire sweeps south through the sheds, I'll drive the handcar north."

"Do you know what you're sayin'?" Eph asked, his face revealing the horror he felt.

"Sure, I do! Got it all planned."

"Why'd they blame me for it? They'll believe me when I tell 'em the truth."

"You won't tell 'em," Jud Marlin replied. "Because, before I shoot out the lamp and start the fire, I'm goin' to shoot you. They'll find what's left of you and think you burned here in the depot."

MARLIN spoke in a matter-of-fact manner, in an ordinary conversational voice, and laughed a little when he had finished speaking. That he was insane, Eph did not doubt. But the fact of his insanity did not lessen Eph's peril. Hating the railroad as he did, Jud Marlin would do anything to cause it trouble. A thing like a mere human life would not deter him.

The sounder began clattering, and Eph knew Mora was trying to get him. She would be suspicious if he did not reply, for she knew he intended to remain up all night, and also that, trained as he was, even if asleep the sounder would awaken him.

"That's not the dispatcher," Marlin commented. "I know the sound of his send. He's a pounder. Whoever that is has a slower touch. Your girl?"

"That—that's right," Eph told him. "She knows I'm up. Everybody along the line is. Just wants to talk, I suppose."

"Don't answer!" Marlin ordered.

"If I don't, she may think somethin' is wrong."

"Let her think it. Somethin' will be wrong later. Won't she be shocked and surprised when she learns what happened to you!"

"You're a devil!" Eph burst out.

"I aim to be. I want a reputation for bein' one."

"If they blame me, like you said, they won't think you had anything to do with it."

"Oh, they'll get around to thinkin' that way some day!" Marlin assured him.

The sounder began clattering again. This time it was the dispatcher, and he was calling Rock Siding.

"Don't answer!" Marlin ordered. "Let the old buzzard worry. He used to burn me up over the wire twice a week. Sent in a report askin' that I be fired."

"If I don't answer—"

"Let him fuss and stew!" Marlin decided.

Then they heard the dispatcher calling Indian Bend and asking if they could get through to Rock Siding. Mora replied that she had just tried to get Rock Siding and hadn't been able to do so, and was worried. The dispatcher knew of the romance.

The wire was quiet. Jud Marlin looked at the clock again, and made himself another cigarette. The snowplow was reported in at Silver Creek.

"That means that No. 8 will be there in fifteen or twenty minutes, and will pass No. 9," Marlin observed. "It'll soon be time to start the fireworks."

"Won't you change your mind?" Eph begged. "You won't gain anything by killin' me. They'll catch you some day and make you stretch rope."

"You won't be here to see me stretch it," Marlin reminded him.

WHAT would happen if Marlin carried out his plan was horribly plain to Eph. The little station, the main line and siding in front of it, were in the clear. But there was a high windbreak behind the station, running in each direction to connect with the snowsheds, made of thick old timbers and planking that would ignite easily from a blazing heat.

If Marlin shot down a lamp, oil from it would set fire to the little depot. The raging wind would carry the flames through the structure, attack the platform, catch the windbreak and rush on to the sheds. The draft through the sheds would send the fire racing along the mountainside, creating an inferno of heat and flame. Rushing hot air would give an urge to the traveling flames.

And the doomed limited, crawling slowly upgrade through the sheds with its load of living freight, would encounter that holocaust before it could retreat.

Eph tried to keep from thinking of the picture. He made an effort to drive all terror from his mind. He had to do something quickly, he knew. And how could he, small and ill and weak, master this strong beast of a Jud Marlin?

Wildly, he thought of almost everything, discarded plans he knew would not lead to success. He glanced at Jud Marlin frequently. Marlin was swigging more coffee. He motioned for Eph to refill the mug, and, gun held ready, he watched carefully while Eph carried the big pot to the table and poured and returned the pot to the stove.

The idea of a last desperate chance came to Eph. If it failed, Marlin would shoot him down. But if he did not try something, Marlin would shoot him anyway when he decided the time had come.

Marlin was watchful that Eph did not

go to the telegraph board and try to get his gun from the drawer. He had been watchful that Eph did not try to smash him with the coffeepot. But he disregarded ordinary, casual movements.

After returning the coffeepot to the stove, Eph hooked the lid lifter in a lid of the old cook stove, then stooped and got a stick of wood from the box beside it. Marlin grinned and swung up the gun.

"You ain't thinkin' of tryin' to brain me with that skinny stick of wood, are you?" he asked.

"Got sense enough to know I couldn't live to get near enough to you," Eph replied.

His heart was pounding as he turned his back, lifted the stove lid and slid the stick of wood into the firebox. Such a simple weapon! But luck had to be with him if he won.

He pretended the stick of wood stuck, and jammed it at the bed of embers a couple of times. Finally, he had the stick in the firebox. Standing sideways to Marlin and not looking at him, he lifted the stove lid with the lifter as if to put it in place.

SUDDENLY, he whirled and cast the lid off the lifter like a boy casting a rock from a sling. Jud Marlin had the coffee mug up to his mouth, and was drinking. He was watching Eph, too, but the hot stove lid caught him full in the face as he tried to drop the cup and lift his gun.

The gun exploded, and the bullet sang past Eph's head and thudded into the wall. Eph had jumped forward as soon as he had cast the stove lid. As Marlin reeled, trying to get out of the chair and on his feet, Eph was upon him.

He began striking Marlin on the head with the lid lifter, careful not to let Marlin get hold of him. That would have meant a quick end of him, Eph knew. One smash of the lid lifter made Marlin drop his gun from a hand suddenly numbed. He reeled, and Eph had a chance to strike him behind the ear.

As the big man tottered, Eph continued hammering at him. Marlin crashed to the floor. Eph struck him on the head twice more. Then he ran to a corner where he had a coil of half-inch rope that recently had been sent him with some supplies.

He continued sobbing from nervousness and fear as he knelt beside the unconscious Marlin and began using the rope. He tied Marlin's wrists behind him, ran the rope down and lashed it around the ankles. Then he ran the rope tightly around and around Marlin's body.

Marlin was groaning when he had finished, returning to consciousness. Eph tested the ropes and stepped back. Marlin's head was covered with blood, and blood was upon the floor and table.

Eph felt suddenly weak and almost fell. But he drew on his remaining strength and reeled into the office and to the telegraph board. His hand was shaking as he opened the key. He was thinking that the distant dispatcher could tell by the sound of his "send" that something was wrong.

He received the dispatcher's acknowledgment.

"R-S," Eph sent. "Jud Marlin got off No. 8 and entered depot. I subdued him by trick. Have him securely bound."

The dispatcher was not long in sending the reply: "Good man. Stop No. 9 and turn over prisoner. Will have orders for No. 9. Station operator aboard coming in to Sierra Grande. Will have him relieve you. You ride No. 9 to Indian Bend and spend New Year's with your girl. More later."

Afterward, Eph remembered turning on the red. He remembered how the limited ground to a stop, how the conductor came in for orders and heard the story.

Trainmen appeared and took charge of a conscious Jud Marlin who was screeching oaths. The sounder clattered, and orders came through for the relief operator to take charge of Rock Siding, and for the limited to proceed to Indian Bend, carrying Eph on it.

But before all that happened, Mora had cut in to hold a conversation with Eph.

"Heard everything, honey. So glad we can spend New Year's together and make plans for next spring. After this you will practically own the railroad. They are sure to give you a good post. And do not forget the cash reward posted for the capture of Jud Marlin. You can take a few dollars out of it and buy me a wedding ring."

"Be seeing you in about an hour," Eph sent back.

"Kiss waiting," Mora wired.

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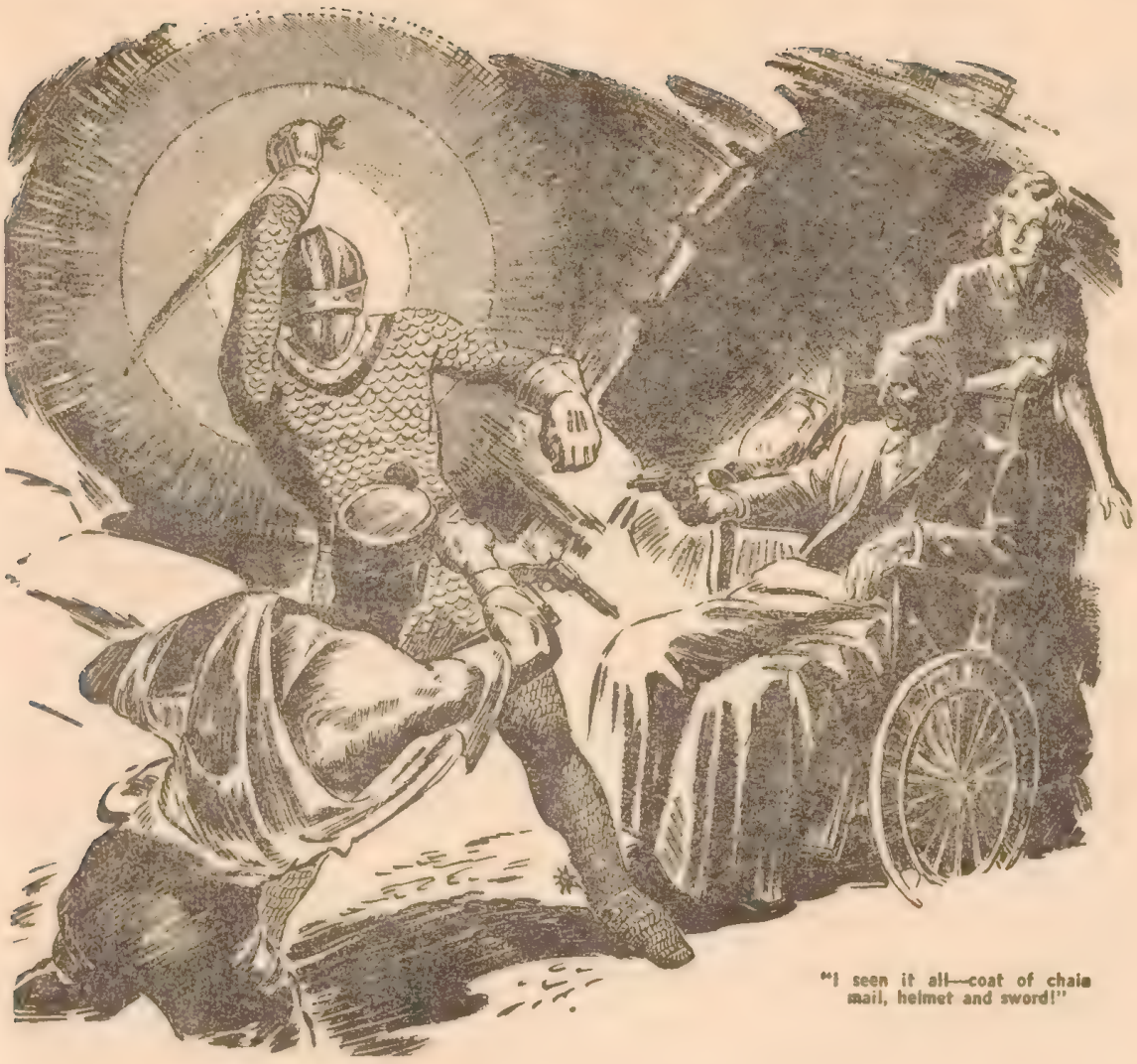

"I seen it all—coat of chain mail, helmet and sword!"

HIGH GRADIN' GHOST

By LEE PRIESTLEY

Cimarron Riley and Dude Dunham find silver—to say nothing of a ghost and a gal—in them thar hills!

DUDE DUNHAM grinned at Cim and waved airily at the limestone walls dimly seen in the flickering light.

"Hotel de Cave ain't so modern, but it's some better than picnickin' on the pass tonight. I git into the durnedest places follerin' you around!"

"Who's follerin' who?" Cimarron Riley, rusty-red of hair, weathered and quizzical of face, looked sourly at his friend. "Who talked me into quittin' a good job in Texas, huh?"

Cim had been satisfied on the Concho, but Dude had argued that they'd never amount to a hill of beans there. All fall the two had drifted—fording the Pecos at Horsehead—following the Goodnight-

Loving Trail into the Sacramentos—crossing the desert to the San Augustin pass in the Organs, where below them wound the silver loop of the Rio Grande. Still heading west they were deep in the Magdalenas, climbing to the Divide, when the sudden high altitude storm caught them.

Cim watched Dude investigating the cave they had entered for shelter. Dude's yellow hair bristled with curiosity. His blue eyes popped with it and his lanky lope expressed it. He explored the cave as he did the world, with all the enthusiasm of a half grown pup, confident that Cim would rescue him if he dug out a badger.

Dude poked his head in a tunnel at the back of the cave, partially blocked with flat slabs of shale from which timber ends protruded at crazy angles. Cobwebs had caught the dust of years to drape every surface with desolation and decay.

"Don't go any farther, Boy," Cim called to him. "Not till I take a squint at the roof anyway. You want the whole mountain to fall on you?"

Dude came back to kindle a long splinter at the fire. When it blazed into a torch he looked into the second tunnel.

"I'm plumb disappointed in your old mine, Cim." He returned to throw the torch into the coals. "Ain't a gleam or a glitter nowheres."

Cim pointed to the draping cobwebs with the knife he was using to slice bacon. "Accordin' to them old *caballeros*, it oughta be richer than the Denver Mint. 'Where there's spiders, there's treasure,' they said." He looked at the flint hard limestone where the dust of years lay undisturbed. "I reckon the last mule load went trottin' down to Chihuahua years ago. But there was silver here once. That cut cross on the rock outside is a Padre's mark showin' treasure claimed for the Church."

THE cave floor proved a restless bed, but Dude slept noisily and at last Cim himself dropped off. He didn't know what had wakened him when he opened his eyes to a sulking fire. He shivered in the dank, cold dimness. Then he saw Dude sitting up in his blankets, staring into the black tunnel mouth with an incredulous look on his sleepy face. While Cim blinked, Dude leaped to his feet, snatched up a smoldering stick and ran into the tunnel.

Cim flung off his own tangled bed and pounded after him, swearing as the rocks bit into his socked feet and with the back of his neck crawling in apprehension as he remembered his distrust of the untimbered roofs. Far away, he heard Dude yell. Then subterranean silence closed down again.

Running, Cim crashed into the wall with a force that exploded stars in his head. He groped frantically in the darkness and cursed his stupidity in not snatching a torch as Dude had. His mind pictured the boy either dead or dying in the black void. Feeling his way around a bend he skidded to a stop beside a sharp dip in the floor. On the edge lay the still smoldering torch, but of Dude there was no sign. He leaned far out, torch in hand, trying to see what lay at the bottom, nearly toppling over in surprise when he heard the splash of water and Dude's voice swearing faintly.

"You all right?" he yelled anxiously.

'Me? Sure. Why not? Come on."

"How'd you get down?"

Dude's voice drifted up through more splashing. "On the seat of my britches. You can't miss."

Relieved but exasperated, Cim slid down the dip. There was an instant of falling before he splashed into a pool of shallow, icy water. Sputtering and damning Dude with every breath, he saw that the other end of the pool grew visibly green and he waded carefully over the slippery rock to where bright moonlight shone between the surface of the water and the roof of the passage.

Splashing out he found Dude dripping and shivering besides the thread of water. A few clouds scurrying across the bright moon and the mountain wind exploring the marrow of their bones were reminiscent of the storm.

Cim shook himself like a dog. "Why the devil did I have to git wet, too?" he demanded furiously.

"Misery sure loves company," Dude's teeth chattered between the words. "Anyway, it's Saturday night."

"I didn't need a bath that bad," Cim snorted. "Let's see can we get back to some dry clothes." He turned and waded into the stream.

When the two reached the foot of the dip again, Cim began feeling along the sides of the slick rock. In a few minutes he guided Dude's hands in the darkness to a series of niches that led upward.

"We'd sure been in a tight, if there hadn't been steps here some time," he said, his voice shaking with cold. "Climb, you crazy clabberhead."

As they stirred the fire to a roar and peeled out of their wet clothes Cim demanded, "What made you tear out like a spooked steer? I oughta bang your head against the wall yet. Scarin' me outa ten years' growth!"

Dude scoured his shoulders with his wadded shirt while a puzzled look twisted his face. "I seen a ghost, Cim! A silvery shinin' spook!"

Cim snorted. "Now I know you was pullin' leather on a runaway nighthoss."

"I'm not ribbin', honest. I woke up and I seen this—this—whatever it was, I swear I did. Still," Dude interrupted himself, "I always heard runnin' water stopped a ghost." As he stood on one long leg meditatively rubbing the other with the wadded shirt he looked like a puzzled stork.

But he wouldn't budge from his story. He had seen a ghost that clanked, in a suit of old armor shining dimly like the moon behind a cloud. Warmed and dry again, Dude argued that sleep would be a mistake until they looked down the second tunnel to make sure the ghost wasn't brightening a corner down there.

EQUIPPED with crude torches they set out. In a short distance and around a bend the tunnel sprayed out into a maze of tortuous passages, untimbered and narrow. Cim held up the torch, then shook his head.

"A whole gatherin' of ghosts could hide down here and the devil hisself couldn't find them."

Retracing his steps, Dude paused near a tumble of broken stone. "Cim," he said, "shine your light here. It seems kinda funny that—"

As Cim turned, his torch described an arc across the walls and roof, reflecting from the entrance to a traverse that Dude was about to enter. Reflecting? Cim looked closer.

"Dude!" he yelled, "Get outa there!"

"Comin'; soon as I look down—"

Dude did not finish. Flat on his face, the breath jerked out of him by Cim's breakneck tackle, he heard a heavy thump inches from his head. At the same instant his shoulder was sharply rapped. Dust in choking clouds swirled in the flickering light of the dropped torches.

Cim got to his knees slowly, tearful eyes on the bulging untimbered roof close above them. Dude's eyes popped. A doublejack, the heavy mining hammer, lay on the floor almost touching his forehead, its handle tipped against his shoulder.

"I dunno why your skull ain't busted like a dropped punkin," Cim said grimly. "That thing," he jerked a thumb at the doublejack, "was balanced so's it would smash anybody comin' in. Let's get outa here. It's a Lord's blessin' the jar didn't bring the roof down."

Dude felt his skinned elbows tenderly, still staring at the doublejack. "Say! There ain't no dust on the hammer, Cim!"

"There ain't no flies on your ghost neither," Cim said cryptically. . . .

Next morning the trail led them around a spur of the mountain to a row of deserted cabins returning to ruin. Along the meanders of the stream a single street, bordered with patches of decayed wooden sidewalk and lined with false two-story "Leadville fronts," windowless and forlorn, ran aimlessly. Sagging doors stood open on walls covered with peeling layers of yellowed newspaper and floors patterned with small dusty tracks.

Somewhere a creaking hinge broke the heavy silence that hung over the town, a silence compounded of loneliness and defeat. At the end of the street a lop-eared gray burro emerged from the open door of the little spired church to stare at them morosely.

"Ghost town, by golly," Dude said. "Reckon that's a burro's ghost?"

"That's an old prospector," Cim corrected him. "They don't never die—they turn into burros and keep roamin'." He pointed to a peeling sign. "This might have been Tri-Bullion—a real boomer in the bonanza days."

The gray burro slanted his ears and broke into a stiff-kneed trot. A girl had stepped out on a rickety platform in front of the last building on the deserted street. She did not see the approaching riders as she stood feeding the burro and scratching his rapt ears.

Dude stared, then he took off his hat, licked the tips of his fingers to smooth his hair down, twitched the flat crowned stetson to a better angle and pulled his neckerchief straight. Something about the straight back and the mass of brown hair curling on slim shoulders made a man

wish he'd worn his other shirt, Cim thought.

Hearing their horses then she whirled around and Cim nodded with satisfaction. He liked wide blue eyes under dark brows curving like a bird's wings, and a straight, proud little nose. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Dude's neck begin to redden, always the first signal of that susceptible heart.

"Mornin', Miss," Cim swept off his hat with what he felt was a certain air. "Are you the committee to welcome distinguished visitors?"

A dimple showed at the corner of the girl's red mouth but her tone was grave as she asked, "And when will the distinguished visitors arrive?"

Before Cim could answer a voice boomed from some place out of sight. "Meggie, me lass, I hear you talkin' to yourself and what's worse answerin' back!"

AROUND the corner of the platform a giant vigorously propelled his wheel chair. A shock of white hair framed his face, wrinkled and high colored as a winter apple, and blue eyes like the girl's looked sharply out under the shelves of bristling brows. He whirled the chair to an expert stop on the edge of the platform.

"And who might you be?" he roared. "Strangers is scarcer than hen's teeth in these mountains." The laugh wrinkles at the corners of the blue eyes deepened and he whispered loudly to the girl. "Hurry up, Meggie, and sell 'em a bill of goods. We got to work that mouldy sowbelly off on somebody."

"MacTavish, even for a Scotchman, you're near," the girl told him sternly. "I gave that bacon to the twins' tike this morning." She sniffed disdainfully. "Not that he wanted it—" She broke off to sniff again. "My pies!" Her starched skirts swished as she ran lightly around the corner.

Cim could look again then at the man in the wheel chair. His gaunt frame was enormous—wide shouldered, long armed—hands as big as a Yaqui Indian's. His upper body filled the chair entirely, but there was a queer slackness below his waist as seen through the muffling of a plaid shawl.

"I'm Tom MacTavish," the man said, "and that young woman with no respect for my gray hairs is my daughter Meggie. Light and hitch, boys. It's too early to go a short ways and too late to travel a far piece so you might as well stop for dinner."

Cim and Dude looked at each other and slid out of their saddles to knot reins to the leaning hitching post. As they clacked up the shaky steps, MacTavish pointed a forefinger at Dude.

"You go help my Meggie with them pies, laddie. She don't get much chance to palaver with young sprouts."

Cim watched enviously as Dude walked off. MacTavish waved him to a chair leaning against the cracked wall.

"We ain't overun with visitors in Tri-Bullion," he said, curiosity frankly plain in his eyes and voice.

Cim obliged with a sketch of their recent travels. "I figgered this might have been Tri-Bullion," he said. "Used to be a boomer, huh?"

MacTavish's face brightened and, chuckling at a memory, he hitched his chair around to face Cim. "This'll give you an idee of how big the old town was oncet. Some cowpokes on a toot rode down the main street one night shootin' out the lights. Well, sir, so many miners dived under the pool table in the Happy Hour Billiard Parlor—right next door there—that they raised that table a foot off'n the floor!"

Cim threw back his head, laughing. The movement raised his vision to the twisted angles of the next building. A man stood listening, half concealed by the shadow.

MacTavish's voice boomed along. "Hard rock men swarmed here in them days and they took millions outa these mountains." His voice grew stubbornly confident. "And there's millions still waitin' to be took. Some day she'll come back."

"You and Miss Meggie ain't the only people in town, surely?" Cim asked.

"Right here in town, yeah," the giant nodded. "There's a few old die-hards out in the mountains takin' out a little zinc and buyin' bacon and beans from us. Drifters once in so often and a eddicated feller diggin' in the cliff houses. She's a ghost town all right."

Cim leaned back in his chair again, his eyes flickering across the gray building, but the listener was gone. He wondered who on that short list would have any interest in hearing what MacTavish and a casual stranger might say to each other.

"Kinda odd," he said idly. "A ghost and

a ghost town—a silver city and a silver-plated spook."

The man in the wheel chair was utterly still. Only his eyes glinted like ice in the sun. "Who told you?" he asked in a stony voice. "How'd you find out?"

"Maybe you and me's not talkin' about the same thing," Cim said. "Nobody told me nothin' and I ain't found out nothin'. We just sashayed some with a spook last night in an old diggin'."

"Tell me!" There was urgency and fear in the resonant whisper.

Cim shifted uneasily. He had expected laughter and scoffing unbelief, not a stunned acceptance. He told of the gleaming ghost and of their chase through the midnight tunnels. MacTavish's eyes clung to Cim's face and his great hands gripped the arms of his chair until the knuckles stood out white.

"That doublejack come within an inch of killin' the boy," Cim concluded, "and Lord only knows why the jar didn't bring the roof down. So we took outa there, figgerin' that spook had a mean streak."

"The devil won't keep him in hell," MacTavish groaned. "Look!" He swept the plaid shawl away from his waist.

CIM saw then why the man's great body dwindled—his legs were shrunken and atrophied, dangling halfway down the skirt of the chair. Cim had a shuddering impression of Humpty Dumpty, great head and body balanced precariously on spindly, spidery legs. He turned away as MacTavish replaced the shawl. It would be an insult to let the pity he felt show in his face.

"Fifteen years I've been chained to this chair, a livin' dead man," MacTavish said through gritted teeth. "Me, that was the strongest lad in Aberdeen." He whirled the wheel chair closer, "Listen. Twenty years ago I come here with Meggie's mother and time was the MacTavish Trading Company kept a twelve-thousand-dollar stock on them shelves.

"But seein' men take money outa the ground is like the fever. Sooner or later you catch it too. So I sunk every dollar we had in an old Spanish workin'. I heard some talk about the mine bein' unlucky, but I was too bullheaded to heed, and the broke down *caballero* it belonged to, he took the money quick, crossin' hisself.

"Then I changed the mine's name from *El Fantasma* to The Rose and Thistle and inside a month we'd found a new vein. When I had trouble keepin' men I laid it to that silicified limestone down there bein' so hard a pick'll bounce. But the men wasn't scared to get their backs inta it; they was just scared. There's somethin down there, Cim.

"The men was vague and blunderin' as a blind mare, but I finally pried it outa my superintendent that they was seein' a ghost. Seems the Spanish takin' out the first silver worked the Indians plumb to death. They stood it patient, till they got the idee that they didn't have nothin to lose. Then they planted the old Don down a hole. But the devil hisself wouldn't have him so he come back, still wearin' his shiny armor and still handy with a sword. That's the story I didn't listen to when I bought the mine."

"But surely you don't believe—" Cim interrupted.

"Seein's believin', ain't it?" MacTavish asked sharply. "I seen it shinin', and as plain as I see you now. Coat of chain mail, helmet, and sword. I tell you, Cim, I heard the big Spanish spurs jinglin' as it walked!"

"What'd you do when you seen the spook?"

"Chased it," MacTavish was brief. "Havin' more spunk than sense. But I lost it in the tunnels."

Remembering the maze of passageways, Cim could believe that. "But you seen it again?" he asked, careful not to look at the swathing shawl.

MacTavish shook his white head. "No, I didn't see it again. I just didn't come home. When Margaret got men to hunt me, they brung me out for dead. The doctors in Denver was kinda puzzled about the wound in my back. They said it looked like a sword cut." In a voice bare of all emotion, the man went on.

"It killed Margaret, too. Time they got me into this chair she was gone with her baby. I sent Meggie to her aunts—she was just a little thing. She got outa school last year and I ain't had the heart to send her back, but the store ain't makin' a livin' for two." His voice died away.

There was silence on the platform where the sun warmed the warped, gray boards. Then MacTavish abruptly rolled himself away. Cim sat thoughtfully until he found that his pockets held only an empty tobacco sack. Then he got up to get another from his saddlebags.

At the hitching rack two identical men regarded him with identical scowls on

their dour, dark faces. Broad-shouldered and squat, one of the pair wore a miner's lamp in his cap while the other dangled a doublejack and steel. A shaggy burro slouched behind them deliberately chewing a weed stalk.

"I betcha nobody ever sees you fellers for the first time without thinkin' that last drink was one too many," Cim began sociably, reaching for a cigarette paper. What he might have said next was lost in an angry snarl. He spun around, startled, just as the Welsh terrier sniffing at his heels bit hard. Cim yelled and shook the leg to which the dog was clamped violently. At the peak of the leg's arc, the dog let go and sailed out into the road.

"Ye kicked me tike!" the nearest of the two men roared in a Cornish accent, thick as mountain mist. His arms bowed out and his great fists clenched, he advanced on Cim.

"Hold on, Cousin Jack," Cim said reasonably. "Your dog bit me. Didja expect me to turn the other leg?"

"Kain't no outlander kick me tike," the man persisted, rumbling with rage. He rushed then, swinging at Cim with force enough to set a fence post. Cim automatically bobbed and sidestepped, but the snarling man kept coming.

"Listen, you crazy coot!" Cim yelped. ducking the windmill of arms flailing around him. "I didn't kick the blasted dog, but I'm gonna get sore in a minute!"

A FLYING fist grazed his ear. With a roar that mingled rage and pain, Cim belted the blue-whiskered jaw with a punch travelling from his heels. The twin rocked, but bored back in with both arms swinging. Cim's head hummed from another glancing blow. If that fist ever caught him square—! Then with his hands more than full with one twin, Cim caught sight of the other, circling them with uplifted hammer ready.

"Ain't no time to be proud," he muttered, slashing at the snarling face. He raised his voice to a yell, "Dude! Come a-runnin'!"

"Never mind the reinforcements, friend," said a calm voice behind him. Then the voice snapped commandingly, "Drop it, Lloyd!" Cim heard a thump and the voice added, calm again. "Go right ahead. I'll keep the hammer out."

While Cim spared a startled glance at the man, half hidden behind blue-tinted glasses and a curly riot of hair and beard, slouching in his saddle threatening the hammer-wielding twin, his own jaw exploded. Or it felt as if it did. His heels lifted and he fell back into whirling space. Then the triumphant twin kicked him soundly and drew back his big booted foot to kick again. That jolt brought Cim out of his floating daze.

Coming up to a crouch, Cim grabbed the descending foot and lifted. When the Cornishman fell with a crash that made his solid bulk bounce, Cim covered the distance to the man's jaw with a flying jab that had every ounce of his weight and rage behind it. The twin's head lolled on his short neck and he lay still. Cim was holding his reeling head when Dude came charging around the corner followed by Meggie and MacTavish, his wheel chair humming.

Meggie stormed at the man on the ground. "Llewelyn Hughes! You get right up from there! And go straight home! Lloyd," she ordered the other twin, "you pack him on the burro. And if you either one pick another fight, I'll never bake you another pie as long as I live!"

Without a word the defeated brothers drew away. Cim stumbled over to the steps and sat down. He laughed shortly.

"Man for man, this place is deadlier than Dodge on Pay Day!" He pulled up his levis to look at his bitten leg.

"Please don't blame the twins too much." As Meggie sat down beside him, Cim hastily pulled down his pants leg, turning red as a turkey's neck.

"They're suspicious of strangers," she explained, "but when you get to know them better—"

"I'd never love that pair like brothers," Cim shook his head.

The man with the blue glasses and the black thatch swung from his saddle and sauntered over to the steps.

"What Meggie means, in her sweet charity," he said, smiling down at the girl, "is that the twins have lived too long in these mountains. They're 'hill nutty'."

"Thanks for holdin' the hammer out," Cim told him. "I'm some hardheaded, but not that much."

"My name's Bennington Barker." The man stretched out a brown, calloused hand to Cim and then to Dude. "I prowl around at the prehistoric village sites every summer. The twins told me this morning you were here. Staying with us long?" He slapped white dust from worn

whipcords and sat down beside Meggie with a proprietary air.

"Just floatin'," Cim answered. "When these twins see a stranger, do they always take him in?"

MacTavish supplied the story. "They come over from the tin mines in Cornwall the same year we come from Aberdeen and bein' minin' men they naturally headed for the big strikes. They worked for me a while and there ain't a better pair with the steel and the doublejack nowhere. But an old Cornish fortune teller, she read Llew's fate at the bottom of a teacup predictin' he'd die below ground."

MacTavish smiled wryly. "That ain't no more than minin' men expect, of course, but Llew he fooled her. He come up topside and he ain't been underground for more than fifteen years. The twins got a little one burro zinc mine and Lloyd does the shootin' and the muckin' and Llew hauls the ore to the Mountain City mill. They think there's silver in their diggin's and that's why they don't like strangers. Reckon they are kinda 'hill nutty', but they're good boys."

CIM turned his direct gaze on Barker. "You're one of these arche-ologists, Mr. Barker? Doin' some diggin'?"

Barker took his pipe from his mouth and held it in big hands. "No, really I'm an ethnologist; I study Indian customs, you know. Sometimes I dig, but right now I'm writing a monograph on Indian religions."

Cim looked impressed, but he objected, "Seems like you'd have to have live Indians to study their customs."

"Not necessarily," Barker shook his head, puffing at his pipe. "We deduce facts from what we find. The kinds of pottery shards found in the *kivas*, for example, tell about religious practices."

"Their religion's sure interestin', ain't it?" Cim asked. "What do you do, write down the chants and tell about the dances?"

"That's the gist of it."

"I knowed an old Indian once that sung me some rain songs. You heard the one that stopped the Fifty-Year Drouth?"

Barker nodded. "Rain was vital to the desert dwelling Indians."

Cim got to his feet stiffly then. "Well, folks, this has been mighty pleasant, dog bite and all, but we was headin' for Arizona."

"We don't have to be in such an all fired hurry, do we?" Dude turned stricken eyes on the girl. "I mean we was invited—well, it's kinda impolite to skip Miss Meggie's good dinner." He floundered to a red-faced stop. Meggie said nothing but there was regret in her face.

"Why don't you step in the store, Cim, and see if they's anything you need?" There was an appeal in MacTavish's direct look, too.

"You won't find a better ghost town in Arizona," Barker got to his feet, laughing. "Now when I find something nice, I stay with it!" He bowed with exaggerated gallantry to Meggie. "Well, so long, boys. Been nice knowing you."

After Cim had talked with MacTavish, he looked for Dude. At his suggestion that they stay another day in Tri-Bullion, Dude's face lit up with a grin that threatened to meet at the back of his neck. "Now leave me get this straight. You want I should tell everybody that I see that we're stayin' because you got a hen on? You want me to act mysterious? Sure can do."

His eye caught the pert flip of a starched skirt at the kitchen steps and the brisk clatter of a spoon as the girl gave scraps to the terrier. "I gotta go, Cim. I told Meggie I'd help her with the dishes."

Cim stared after his friend. "I bet he don't even remember he left Texas to show Annabelle Adams he'd amount to somethin'!" he said aloud. "Well, Meggie could turn older heads than his'n." As he pulled the reins loose from the hitching rack, he told himself wryly, "Includin' yours, you old fool!" Swinging into his saddle he argued with that jeering inner voice.

"Fool I likely am, but I ain't so old, durn you! Thirty-five ain't totterin' old age!" But thirty-five would seem ancient to Meggie's bright youth. Cim sighed and turned toward Mountain City.

There he loafed, made a purchase or two and fell into casual conversation with the express agent. He rode past Tri-Bullion again late in the afternoon unseen even by the morose burro. Beside the rock of the deep-cut cross, he unrolled a bundle. He lit the miner's lamp and fastened it into a cap, then picking up hammer and steel he entered the second tunnel. He walked softly and kept his free hand near his gun, but he saw only the pulsing dark pushed back by his fee-

ble light and heard only the click of his bootheels on the shale.

No doublejack awaited him at the traverse entrance either. Inside a few yards, he found that he would not need the tools, for the vein showed like white iron netting the paler limestone. Then remembering that Dude had been curious about the floor, Cim bent to look. Close to a wall, he saw the tracks. A dog had walked in the thick, white dust. He scratched his red forelock meditatively as he retraced his steps to the entrance.

He was riding around the spur when a pebble fell into the trail ahead of him. Cim eyed it, but he did not look up to the rim. Instead he pulled his Stetson lower to shadow his face and shifted slightly so he could catch any motion from the corner of his vision. A badger taking his lordly passage might have rolled the pebble down. Then he saw the twins' tike skulking beneath the gnarled junipers growing in the tilted rocks. Cim considered it an odd place for a Welsh terrier to take a walk—alone.

At dusk Cim extracted Dude from Meggie's kitchen with some trouble. To the boy's questions, he said only "You and me is goin' to bait a trap and don't ask me nothin else. I'll tell you when I find out myself."

AT THE cave they spread their bed rolls as they had done the night before and again lit a small fire. "Now we play 'possum," Cim directed. "Act like you're sleepin', till mornin' or callers come."

The hours passed slowly and Cim had hard work to stay awake. From Dude's blanket he heard snores that told him the younger man had found it impossible. At last came the faint breeze that is not so much a flow of air as a forecast of dawn. It was then he got the feeling that he was being watched. The hair on the back of his neck prickled and unseen eyes glared from the wall of darkness that threatened the dying fire.

He could see nothing through his slitted eyelids so he lay quietly, breathing deeply and evenly as if he were asleep. After long moments the atavistic warning of danger faded. He turned his head slowly. Far down the second tunnel the faintest light bobbed and dipped close to the floor.

Reaching over he clutched Dude's shoulder. Awakened, Dude got to his feet and reached for his boots as Cim whispered:

"Looky! The ghost wants us to try *his* trap! Let's call him. Go on, and shoot first and look later. Here, wait." Cim handed him a pick handle as a secondary line of attack.

Dude whispered, grinning, "I reckon I'll make good bait. I been called a big hunka cheese before now."

As he walked into the tunnel, Cim hissed after him, "Stay in the middle, boy, and watch the entrances. I'm right behind you."

The bobbing light obviously waited. Cim knew then it was a lure to draw them into the tunnel. Dude walked slowly, his boots clicking on the fallen shale while Cim crept silently along the wall, his Irish blood reassured by the hard feel of the pick handle. The ghost couldn't do much against the two of them.

The light grew brighter, its glow dimly showing the bend in the tunnel. The two men stood still in the pulsing darkness, listening until their ears began reporting imaginary noises to fill the soundless vacuum.

Cim put a hand on Dude's arm and breathed rather than spoke. "I'll jump first. Foller right on my heels."

Gun out and pick handle ready, he sprang around the corner. Dude heard his partner's grunt of surprise, but that was the last thing he heard then. Darkness detached itself from the wall behind and engulfed him in roaring, star-shot unconsciousness.

Around the bend Cim stared stupidly at the lamp burning on a ledge in the empty tunnel. The steady flame gave a grotesque air of the commonplace to the few visible yards of rocky passage bounded by Stygian darkness.

"Peaceful as a ranch house kitchen with a light in the winder to keep Pa from fallin' down the well," Cim muttered. But that lamp hadn't climbed to the ledge and lit itself!

"Dude!" he called softly. Why hadn't the boy followed? He called again, louder and with growing panic. His voice bounced, then subterranean silence overwhelmed it. Cim threw down the pick handle and, snatching the lamp, ran back. Dude was gone!

The tunnel was heavily cold with the dead chill of great earth masses, but Cim's body streamed with a sudden sweat of fear. Maybe MacTavish was right. May-

be there was something supernatural in the old mine. His eyes darted against the black walls, and the lamp shook in his trembling hand. How could he find Dude in that twisting maze of tunnels and traverses?

"If your blamed smartness has killed the boy—" he told himself savagely.

He set the lamp down and hurriedly lit his own in the miner's cap. Two flames pushed back the darkness until he saw that he stood opposite two yawning mouths into the mountain, one of them the tunnel of the doublejack. Without hope, he entered it.

"Dude! Dude! Answer, boy!" he yelled, then stood listening for the reply he did not expect to hear.

But he heard something else. Behind him the tiniest sound puzzled his ears, but it was animal wisdom, deep in his muscles, that made him leap aside, instinctively knowing the sound for the indrawn breath that launches attack. A sword blade hissed under his arm, slicing his shirt and knocking the gun from his grasp! Then Cim grappled with living darkness—with a shapeless, floating force of evil.

He breathed again when his fingers found steel and his foot caught around a leg that tensed with only human strength. The smoothering blackness was a heavy cloak! Beneath it gleamed the armor of the silver-plated spook. Smart, but by that very trick proved not supernatural.

THE rowels of great Spanish spurs dug cruelly into his leg, but Cim twisted violently, holding back the sword arm. Shale shifted under their struggling feet. Then the armored enemy crushed Cim to the floor, the sword slipping from the ghost's grasp in the fall. Cim's head rang and a smarting wetness trickled into his eyes, but he kept a precarious grip on the gauntleted hands that drove steel blows into his face. Threshing, he rolled and kicked, but only half avoided the mailed fist crashing down. Dazed, he fell back limply.

Both knees on Cim's heaving chest, the ghost bent over to strike again. With a vague interest, Cim's glazing eyes saw that the looming steel gauntlet had broken, knew that the armor must be fragile with age. Then his brain focused and flogged up his muscles to parry the descending blow.

It was a feeble try, but he turned the fist aside enough to make it skid on his wet forehead, oil-smeared from his smashed lamp, and lose some of its force. Then the broken gauntlet plate caught in the doublet's network of linked chain to pin the fist to the ghost's side. With renewed hope, strength surged back and Cim heaved himself up, dodging a savage kick, to dive for the sword. Coming up with the weapon he forced the ghost, wrenching to free its arm, back into the main tunnel.

His battered head humming, Cim lunged forward but his feet tangled in the dropped black cloak and again he fell heavily, the sword clanging over the shale. As the ghost bent to recover it, a great voice boomed through the tunnel.

"Drop it, you murderin' booger!" MacTavish roared.

Cim shook his head, distrusting eyes and ears. Rocking precariously over the rough floor, a bouncing lantern hung over the back of the wheel chair and a gun held on the ghost, MacTavish lurched from the second tunnel, propelled by a panting Meggie! He stopped the chair with a jolt and Meggie circled the gleaming ghost warily to pick up the sword. Cim began getting to his feet.

"Now yank that helmet off," MacTavish ordered, his blue eyes blazing in the lantern light. "Don't be scared, Meggie, nothin' but a coyote's inside."

Meggie reached far out and pushed the helmet's vizor up. Her mouth fell open as she stared at the furious, glaring face framed by the steel, the eyes darting and dangerous. MacTavish, peering uncertainly, wheeled his chair closer to the still, venomous figure.

"Who in thunder— Barker, what you doin' in—" Understanding came as his face twisted with rage and recognition. "The glasses and the dyed hair and the beard! You murderin' devil! You was my super fifteen years ago! I'll tear you to pieces with my bare hands!"

"Don't get so close, MacTavish!" Cim yelled.

But the warning came too late. Darting like a snake, Barker struck up the gun and sent Meggie sprawling into Cim. The exploding weapon bucked in MacTavish's hand, the bullet singing into the roof, as Barker whirled the wheel chair around.

"Drop it!" he snarled. "I'm trained on Meggie!"

Helplessly the giant in the chair dropped the gun into his lap and Barker reached around for it. Through the swirling dust and gun smoke he began to walk backwards, pulling the wheel chair like a shield.

"Don't move, either one of you, or I'll let the old man have it." Keeping his eyes on Cim and Meggie, transfixed on hands and knees, Barker drew MacTavish up the incline of the tunnel floor. The man glared at Cim. "If you'd kept your nose out, I'd have married Meggie and worked the mine—some—for the old crock." His furious words were punctuated by the click of falling rock jarred from the roof by the gun shot.

Through the growing veil of smoke and dust Cim saw a movement in the dimness behind Barker. It was Dude! His face was smeared with blood and his jaw set grimly as he crept up, pick handle raised. The light from the lantern on the back of the wheel chair picked out two looming figures that crept up on Dude. The two identical shadows were the Hughes twins!

"Regular town meetin'," Cim muttered, gathering himself for a leap. "Sure got a good turnout!"

Then everything happened at once. The pick handle descended with a satisfying thud as Cim and Meggie rushed for the wheel chair and the twins closed in at a run. Barker, twisting at the knees, began to sag to the floor, his gun blazing as he fell.

AN OMINOUS rumbling overhead drew their eyes to the bulging rock that held back the mountain above them. As Cim looked, a crack ran like summer lightning through the slab, then widened, raining dust and small rock to the tunnel floor.

"Run!" Cim yelled, waving his arms in a frantic gesture. "The roof's comin' down!"

Dude grabbed Meggie. Cim, his eyes glued to the spreading break, reached for the wheel chair, but his hands encountered nothing. Then Meggie screamed. The wheel chair with MacTavish slumped against the back was running an erratic course down the incline. The last wild shot from Barker's gun had found a mark.

Dust and cascading rock dropped a moving curtain of death between them and the lurching chair. The great slab that upheld the roof over their heads began to groan and grind, the moment when the moving weight would shatter it only seconds away. Meggie hid her face in her hands, weeping. A great rage swept Cim that MacTavish must die when the easier years he had earned by his fortitude were almost in his grasp.

With an inarticulate growl, Llew Hughes began running, his powerful bowed legs driving him in great leaps. The Welsh terrier raced beside his dour master.

"Come back! Come back! You won't have time!" Lloyd screamed after his brother.

Llew reached MacTavish then. Cim, straining to see through the dust, thought the man lifted the chair bodily to send it careening back. The chair tipped perilously but so great was the impetus Llew had given it that it charged over the fallen shale and coasted up the slope.

Cim darted under the falling rock to get his hands on the foot rest and pulled MacTavish under the big slab, bent until the chair barely cleared.

"Come on, Llew," he panted. "Don't crowd your luck, man!"

Llew's voice growled truculently, "I'm not goin' your way, Mister. I got to tell an old woman she shore knowed her tea leaves."

Racing the chair past Barker's inert body, Cim flashed a look over his shoulder. Llew lay pinned to the tunnel floor by fallen rock. As their eyes met, the Cornishman waved him on. Then the dour face lighted with a derisive smile and Llew brought his thumb up to the end of his nose. The fingers fluttered, then the hand dropped to his chest. Crouched beside his master, the terrier lifted his lips in a snarl.

Sobbing with exertion, Cim whirled MacTavish to the bend as the thundering tons of rock roared down at his very heels. Dude caught hold then and Lloyd Hughes, tears runneling paths down his dusty face, lifted Meggie bodily and ran. After seconds that seemed years they stood on the trail outside the wooden door.

Lloyd's face was stiff with shock and grief. "He made me come," he said brokenly. "He said Barker was up to somethin' and when we saw Mac and Meggie was gone— I thought he was crazy. He was afraid—"

"If Llew was afraid," Cim said gently, as he bent over MacTavish, "may I be as brave a coward."

MacTavish opened his eyes then, their bright blueness dulled by pain. "He ain't man enough to kill MacTavish," he whispered. "Get me home."

As they toiled back with the wounded man, Meggie told them she and her father had taken a short cut into the mine through a natural opening that Llew's dog had found and Llew told about.

"That accounts for the prints," Cim grunted, helping to lift the wheel chair over a stone. "Remind me to beg your pardon, Twin."

Lloyd looked puzzled. "What for?"

"For thinkin' you was Barker's muscle man."

"Did you know it was Barker playin' all the time?" Dude asked. "Me, I took everything he said for gospel."

"He got me to wonderin'," Cim drawled. "Remember when I asked him if he had a rain song used in a fifty-year drouth? He didn't correct me and anybody that knows anything about the prehistoric times in New Mexico knows the Long Drought was only twenty five years."

"Yeah, but what made you suspicious to start with?"

"His hands," Cim said. "Notice how calloused they was? He said he didn't dig much, but them hands had sure been tusslin' with somethin' bigger than a lead pencil. And he was covered with white limestone dust. Indians had more sense than to dig houses outa anything that hard, especially when there's soft gray volcano ash down the canyon.

"I found out in Mountain City he was shippin' regular, boxes labelled 'artifacts' which is a fancy way of sayin' old busted pottery and arrowheads. They weighed right heavy and he sent 'em to a town where I never heard of no schools or museums, but there's a mill there. The rest come easy."

THE sun was climbing the crest when Cim smelled the coffee. He stood unseen in the kitchen doorway, his mouth twitching with amusement. Dude, his eyes on Meggie kneeling to slide pans of biscuits into the oven, dreamily peeled around and around a potato until the marble sized residue slipped through his fingers. Then, looking puzzled into the pan he balanced on his knees, he selected another and began repeating the process.

Meggie, her face half averted from the heat, was worth looking at. Dark lashes brushed her flushed cheeks and her slimness rounded into curves of fluid motion as she reached to turn a pan. She burned her finger then. With a little shriek she dropped the dish towel. The night had shaken her badly. Now, looking at the tiny blister, her lips began to tremble and tears welled into her eyes.

Dude sprang to his feet, water showering over the floor and the mangled potatoes rolling into corners unnoticed. Cim crossed the room in two strides and lifted Meggie to her feet. She stood for a long moment looking first at one and then the other concerned face. Dude, making cooing sounds, caught her by her elbows, but she did not turn. Her eyes had found something in Cim's face, surprising but satisfactory. With a sudden contented motion, she hid a rising blush against his chest.

Cim's arms automatically closed around her while he stared over her head at his friend. Consternation, apology, and then a dawning delight raced over his lean features, but as Meggie's quivering red mouth lifted to his, he forgot Dude's existence. When the girl's arms crept around Cim's neck, Dude slammed the screen and stalked outside.

There was still Arizona, he reflected. There were probably other girls. For the first time in three days, he remembered Annabelle. Sighing, he walked around the corner. MacTavish, his shoulder bandaged, sat looking into the flaming sky with new hope softening his eyes' sharp blueness. Lloyd Hughes crouched beside the wheel chair, comforted by the huge hand on his shoulder.

"I hope you men ain't ga'nted," Dude said sourly, dropping into a chair. "Breakfast's apt to be kinda late this mornin'."

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

YOU CAN'T STAY ON TOP

An Exciting Novelet of the Rodeo Arena

By JOHN C. ROPKE

THE TAMING OF WILD BILL

By SAMUEL MINES

Cibola's saltiest hombre becomes a feather farmer!

IT IS MORE than three years since I have trod the dust of Cibola, New Mexico, and the town is no better looking than it was then. Howsomever, I wouldn't dream of going through without looking up my old pardner, Wild Bill Perkins, even though I am somewhat pressed for time at the moment.

I stop and ask an old-timer where my pardner lives.

"Wild Bill Perkins?" says he, wrinkling up eyes and tugging on his beard. "Ain't nobody round here called 'Wild Bill' Perkins. We got a Bill Perkins, all right —runs a chicken farm out on Goose Crick road, but I wouldn't zackly call him wild."

"Marriage," I says, "may have sobered him down some, but old man, if you was with me when Bill went through the Herrera gang with an empty six-shooter, busting heads like puffballs and screechin' like ten thousand catamounts, you'd know why he was called wild. The governor give him a pair of silver mounted pistols—"

"Son," orates the old-timer, "this here Perkins idee of excitement is to come in town with his buckboard and load up with mash for them chickens. When he passes the saloon he keeps his head turned so's not to see it, and the strongest drink he's ever took to my knowledge is sarsparilly —straight."

"Can't be the same man," I gloom, shaking my head. "Still, old Bill would never forgive me if he knowed I was in town and didn't stop to see him. So I will ride out to this chicken heaven and see for myself that this is some other Bill Perkins. The lily-livered critter you're describing couldn't be my old pard."

So saying, I gig my bronc and canter out on the road to Goose Crick, as directed. I know when I am near the chicken ranch some time before I get there. Them critters ain't got the same aroma as shoats, but it ain't much weaker. There is a nice house, with curtains flapping at the windows and flowers growing in the yard and a white picket fence all around. And there are rows of chicken coops, with hundreds of these silly fowls walking around and clucking like it was almighty important.

"Some folks'll go to a heap of trouble just to get an aig for breakfast," I mutter.

Then I see a sun-browned farmerish looking feller in overalls, fixing a wire fence. I ride up and stop and he puts down his hammer and straightens up.

"Howdy, stranger," I say. "I am looking for Wild Bill—"

"Jackpot!" he yelps. "My old pardner, Jackpot Tolliver!"

He has called me right, but I am still puzzled. "Excuse me," I say, "but do I know you?"

Bill walked forward, his borrowed six-gun barking

"Jackpot! Don't you know me—Bill?"

I look closer and I'll be a maverick if it ain't him all right, Bill Perkins.

"What they been doing to you?" I squawk. "You look watered down like old One-Eye Collins' whiskey!"

HIS HAIR is combed and parted, his face is washed. I am almost at a loss for words.

"This is awful!" I yell. "I wouldna knowed you. Bill do yuh remember the time we cleaned up Twin Forks—run the marshal out of town an' treed the mayor on top of City Hall, and it was three days afore they got him down? Do yuh remember when Injun Joe challenged yuh to a wrestling match in Grogan's saloon and before you two got finished you had wrecked—"

"Sh-shsh," says Bill catching my hand and I note his grip ain't gone back on him, anyway. "Lydia doesn't like to hear about those days. She says that is a chapter out of the dark past which is best forgotten and never brought to mind. She says civilization has come to the West and all those wild and dangerous things has got to go. Lydia has made changes, Jackpot."

"I'll mention politely she has," I mutter, looking at the fowls which have gathered around the fence to get an earful of our conversation. "How do you rope these critters, Bill? And where do you slap your brand?"

"They don't stray, Jackpot," Bill says. "Come up to the house and meet Lydia. She'll want you to stay for dinner."

I hang back, not being anxious to meet this female, but Bill drags me along and I get the surprise of my life. Lydia is no bigger'n a minute, soft and blonde and cuddly with a pair of honest, straight, blue eyes. Shucks, I think to myself, what's all the turble-burly about? A man could pick up this gal in one hand. Nothing to be afraid of.

But I am wrong again and I know it as soon as she opens her mouth.

"Bill has told me about you, Mr. Tolliver," she says. "I hope you have matured as Bill has and realize that the old wild days are truly gone. Bill would no more think of getting drunk and fighting than he would of robbing the bank."

The voice is gentle, but the intentions is chilled steel and a little shiver goes down my back.

"Why, Miz Perkins," I say, like an old hypocrite, "you're plumb right. I wouldn't dream of even mentionin' the bad old days to Bill."

I don't mean a word of it, but I see how the chicken man is shifting from one foot to the other and looking mighty uncomfortable, so I lie glibly and see relief on his face.

"Tell you what," he says, as excited as a schoolboy the last day of school, "let's you and me, Jackpot, take a pair of fishpoles and go up to Canyon Creek. Then we can fish and talk about old times until time for dinner."

"Well, Bill," I says, "I'd mighty like a nice long visit with you, but there's a special reason I got for being in kind of a hurry—"

"Nonsense," says Lydia. "You go along. Bill, you won't go into town, or anywhere near that saloon, will you?"

"No, ma'am," we both say quick, together.

"Good," she says. "I know I can trust you. Just be home in time for dinner, hear?"

So we got our broncs and as we jog up canyon toward the creek, I explain things to Bill.

"The reason I ain't got much time," I tell him, "is that the Rusty Mallon gang is on my trail. Bill, do yuh remember Rusty Mallon?"

"Do I?" he says, with a dreamy look in his eye. "Remember when Rusty and his gang tried to hold up the Stockman's Bank?"

"Yeh. You was trying to borrow two hundred simoleons from old man Carter when Rusty and his brother Tobe came in. You thought they was going to clean out the bank and you wouldn't get your loan and it made you so mad that you rared up and shot Tobe and took a bootheel offa Rusty's boot. When he ran out in the street I leaned outa the window of the saloon with a Winchester and shot him in the leg."

"Weren't those the days?" Bill chuckles. "Rusty went to jail for a while, didn't he, Jackpot?"

"Sure," says I, "but not for long enough. He's out now and I ran into him down near the Border and he recognized me. I lit out, and Bill, I bet he ain't more'n fifty miles back on my trail now. That's why I can't stay. I don't want him gettin' wind you're around here."

"Nonsense," says Bill. "He'll never find you in this out of the way place. And Lydia'd be hurt if you didn't stay."

BILL SEEMED much more worried about Lydia being hurt than about Rusty Mallon puncturing our hides, that married man.

We break out our rods on the creek bank and fish, talking about the good old days, and Bill gets a dreamy look in his eye again and every once in a while he sighs a bit.

"Not that I'd go back, Jackpot. That life was all right for a young kid with no sense. But this is the real thing, a devoted wife, a home, a place in town—"

"And a bunch of cacklin' feathered yearlings to ride herd on," I say. "Hand me that can of worms."

He reaches for the worms, and a Winchester bullet comes screeching out of the pass and takes the can right out of his hand. Two fishpoles go flying in two different directions as we dive for the cover of some boulders. Some more lead bouquets are flung at us, but we are running too fast and they spank the water of the creek.

"Did I say fifty miles behind?" I groan. "I apologize to Rusty Mallon. Bill, I done got you in a mess."

Bill is not packing a gun and all I got on me is my six-shooter. Against us is mebbe five members of Rusty's gang, and if they run true to form they are packing rifles, six-guns, derringers, bowie knives and maybe bombs for all I know. It sure looks bad, and I say so.

"Bad?" says Bill. "You don't know how bad it is, Jackpot. If they keep us holed up here in these rocks we'll be late for dinner, and Lydia, will be worried."

Ain't that a married man for yuh? He wasn't worried about our hides, he was worried about Lydia being irked with him!

The Mallon gang flings lead at us plumb enthusiastic, keeping us holed up close, whilst I hoards our cartridges. Rusty yells down to us, telling us what he's gonna do to us when we give up. I find I don't care much for his idees at all.

Bill chews his nails and looks frequent at a big old dollar watch he hauls out of his pocket.

"Jackpot," he says, "we're due back for dinner now. Lydia is going to be very anxious."

"That's bad," I say, taking a shot at a leg I see sticking out of some brush and missing. "Got ary idees how to get out of this mess?"

"Just lend me your six-gun, will you, Jackpot?" he says, quiet.

"Sure," I reply, passing it over. "What are you gonna do?"

"Come along," says the maniac, getting up and walking right out in the open.

"Bill!" I choke and I am so amazed I walk right after him.

Rusty Mallon lets out a yell of joy and rears up with a Winchester from behind a rock. Bill drills him center. The other outlaws yell too and lead commences to fly like rain. Bill stalks forward, his borrowed six-gun barking. Another one of the gang flops out from behind a cactus clump. A Mexican lays his Winchester across a boulder top for a careful shot and Bill takes the roof of his head off.

The man has no nerves. He just walks forward through the hail of lead and wipes out five of the Mallon boys with six shots. Yeh, he missed one. And he got a nick on one ear-lobe for it. "Come on," he says, brushing at the blood on his ear. "We gotta hurry. Lydia will be worried."

We fan leather and when we come in sight and smell of the chicken ranch, Lydia is standing at the picket fence.

"You're late," she says.

"I'm sorry, dear," Bill says, flustered. "We got to talking; you know how it is."

"Bill, your ear's bleeding! What did you do?"

"Oh, uh, nothing, snagged it on some cactus, I reckon." He put his handkerchief on it.

"I'll get dinner started," she says relieved and hurries off.

I pluck at Bill's sleeve. "Lissen," I say, "there's a reward on them Mallon critters."

"You take it, Jackpot," Bill says scared-like. "I don't want Lydia to know I've been in a fight. She'd get awfully upset—"

"I'll tell the sheriff as I go through Cibola," I say, swinging into the saddle. "Tell Lydia I couldn't stay for dinner, Bill, I got called away sudden."

"She'll be awfully disappointed," Bill says, gnawing his nails.

"I reckon she'll stand the shock pretty well." I shake hands with him. "So long—Wild Bill."

"Come again, won't you, Jackpot?" he says wistfully. "I ain't had so much fun in a long time—talkin' over old times."

"Sure, Bill," I say.

I slap the spurs to the bronc and ride away from there fast. On top of the ridge I stop and scratch my head and ponder. But I don't get nowhere. These married men, they baffle me.

I'm scared stiff the bronc is gonna snap Shoo-fly's head plumb off'n his shoulders

Ride 'Em Cowboy!

By L. P. HOLMES

It's a rodeo riot when Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly do some plain and fancy fence-mendin' for the Cactus County bronc toppers.

SOME FOLKS ain't never satisfied, and don't know when they're well off. Like the citizens of Cactus City. There ain't a thing wrong with Cactus City. She's a nice quiet little town with everybody gettin' along like mice in a barley sack.

By and large life in Cactus City is plumb quiet and healthful and all to the likin' of I and Puggy Jimpson and Shoo-fly Davis. Any way you wants to put it there ain't a thing wrong with our fair city until fat Willie Weehaw gets his big idee. A wise man once said that a single idee can be a dangerous thing. This un of Willie Weehaw's shore turned out to be plenty dangerous. Fat Willie runs the general store in Cactus City,

and as long as he tends strict to storekeepin' he's plumb mild and harmless. When he gets to thinkin', however, the trail gets rough.

Willie Weehaw is the sort who mebbe never gets more'n one real idee in all his life, so when he does he's so dazzled by his own brilliance then he ain't fit to live with. And bein' that it's the only idee he'll ever have, he hangs to it like grim death to a Siwash.

Willie's idee is a rodeo. A rodeo, a great big ol' rip-roarin' rodeo, claims Willie, is just what Cactus City needs to put it on the map in big red letters. It would be somethin' that would fill the folks fit to bust with civic pride. It would revive business, clear the head, sweeten the breath, bring the whole dang Cactus County a bountiful reward of fame and fortune. Accordin' to Willie it'd come close to startin' a regular land rush.

Willie makes it sound real enticin' and folks begin to fall in line until there ain't nobody but I and Puggy and Shoo-fly left with an ounce of common sense and caution. We figger this rodeo business might change things, and we don't like change. We even hate to change loafin' places, like we has to when the sun swings around to the other side of a buildin'.

Willie Weehaw's sprung his idee a full week ago and the town's been chewin' on it ever since. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we're hunkered down in the shade talkin' things over, hopin' for the best, but more'n half expectin' the worst, for that's the way life goes every now and then. Sure enough, here comes Bosco Bates, our sheriff, headin' our way. Puggy groans.

"Misery comin' up. Ol' Bosco's got that kinda look in his eye."

Bosco stops and looks us over. He's a big, tough hombre, Bosco is, and smart folks don't argue too much with him. Bosco says, "We're gonna do it. It's all decided. Committees all appointed and everything. I'm head of the arena committee."

"Swell!" mumbles Puggy. "Congratulations, Bosco."

Bosco twists a scowly eye. "The old freight corrals is gonna be the arena. There's a mite of work to be done, gettin' things in shape."

Work! How I and Puggy and Shoo-fly do hate and despise that cussed word!

I speak up quick-like, but fearful. "What kinda work, Bosco?"

"Well," says Bosco, tickin' items off on his fingers like they wasn't of no account at all, "There's two—no, three—cross fences gotta be yanked up. Likewise the north end of the main corral. We use them posts and planks to swing the north end of the main corral out another fifty or seventy-five yards. We git that done there's a few weeds and some stray cactus brush to be hoed and grubbed out. Then we pick up all the rocks and rake smooth all the rough spots. Then we build a chute, and brace things up here and there."

"We?" chirrups Shoo-fly, kinda panicky.

"You," growls Bosco in his best dang growl. Which is some growl, gentlemen.

Shoo-fly sorta forgets hisself and lets out a mad yammer. "Nothin' doin', Bosco. I ain't no cussed slave. I'm an American citizen and I stand on my rights. I ain't yearnin' one lil' bit to pull up fences or build new ones. I don't hanker one lil' hank to dig post holes, hoe weeds, grub sage brush or any other durn foolishness. Who got this loco rodeo idee to begin with, anyhow? I didn't, or Puggy or Ike. Willie Weehaw did.

"If Willie wants hisself a rodeo let him get out and do all the fixin'! Let him yank fences and dig post holes and fasten hisself to the misery end of a hoe. Do him good. Sweat some of the lard outa him. I and Ike and Puggy ain't interested a-tall in any rodeo. We ain't even fixin' to see it."

Bosco lets Shoo-fly get it out of his system. Then he says, "I'll tell you what you three jiggers is fixin' to do. You're fixin' to do exactly what I tell you to do. Willie Weehaw has plenty else to do. He's chairman of all the committees. He's gonna be Grand Marshal in the parade."

"He's gonna get hisself a sudden death and a deep grave, fust thing he knows," snarls Shoo-fly. "The big, fat pot-walloper! Him and his idees! Visitin' misery on peaceful folks."

Bosco pulls a key outa his pocket and swings it around one finger. It's a big key. It's the key to Bosco's jail house. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly know that jail house plumb intimate. It's hotter'n the hinges, the bunks is hard and the fleas thick and hungry. Bosco don't believe in squanderin' county funds. So them in his jail house don't eat too regular or well. All in all, I and Puggy and Shoo-fly a long time since has decided it's a good place to stay out of.

Bosco looks out toward the old freight corrals and he looks toward his jail house,

all the time twirlin' that key. Soft-like he asks, "Comin', boys—or goin'?"

Now I ask you, man to man, what'd you do in a case like that? You're right. I and Puggy and Shoo-fly brace ourselves erect and foller Bosco over to the corrals.

YANKIN' FENCES up is one thing. Puttin' 'em down in a new place is somethin' else again. Which I and Puggy and Shoo-fly Davis is right now findin' out. Puggy's windin' away at a post hole auger, cussin' with every other breath, swearing this is the hardest piece of ground in all of Cactus County. I and Shoo-fly is truin' up an' tampin' down a post in a hole Puggy's just got through diggin'. The sun's hot, the sweat's runnin' an' the blisters is beginnin' to build up. So's our tempers. Right about then who should show up on the scene but fat Willie Weehaw hisself, lookin' as important an' smug as a fox eatin' fish worms.

"Here he comes," mumbles Puggy between grunts. "The cause of all our troubles an' miseries. He goes givin' us any wise lip an' I wind this here post hole auger around his neck three times."

"I'll do better'n that," vows Shoo-fly. "I'll take me a runnin' jump an' kick him right smack in the middle of that bay winder of his'n."

Me, Ike Ferris, I ain't payin' no worry to Puggy's threats 'cause it takes more'n a sweat an' a mad an' a crop of blisters to really set Puggy on the peck. But Shoo-fly, now he's different. Shoo-fly's a scrawny little runt, grass-hopper size with more hair an' whiskers than a billy goat. And while there ain't a whole lot of Shoo-fly, what there is is all pure poison, once he gets his neck bowed. Shoo-fly touches off like gunpowder on a clear hot day, and when he does there ain't nothin' or nobody in the whole wild world he's afraid of. Except mebbe Bosco Bates.

So I sets about clearin' the water before it gets muddy. "Bosco Bates put us out here to build a arena, Shoo-fly," I warns. "But not to go to chawin' any initials in fat Willie."

Shoo-fly don't say nothin', but I don't like the look that's pinchin' up in his eye. So I'm hopin' fat Willie will keep his gab shut an' be satisfied with jest lookin'. But right now Willie Weehaw is feelin' too danged important to use that much common sense. He starts hunchin' down an' squintin' along the posts we'd already set up. He grabs a couple an' gives 'em a shake. Then he comes marchin' over, steppin' so wide he's like to split his britches.

"You men gotta be more careful," he orates, pompous as a sway-backed bell mare. "You're linin' them posts up crooked an' you ain't settin' 'em deep enough in the ground."

I tries to head him off from the deesaster I see comin' up. "Listen, Willie," I pleads. "You go tend to yore groceryin' an' leave us fence builders alone. We know what we're doin'. We're fixin' things jest like Bosco Bates told us to fix 'em."

I can hear that thin kind of whinin' in Shoo-fly's throat which is the danger signal an' I'm hopin' plenty Willie will take that nice broad hint I'd jest laid down. But not Willie. He's seein' honest men asweatin' on the big idee of his life, an' it goes to his head like smoke up a chimbly.

"I'm the over all Chairman of this here rodeo," he spouts. "I thunk her up, an' I'm runnin' her. Things is gonna be done right, an' no three lazy likker guzzlin', credit moochin', shade-huntin' sons like you junipers is gettin' by with buildin' a arena fence which a slow breeze could blow down. Ain't you got no civic pride?"

That does it. That does it—plenty! I make a grab for Shoo-fly, but that lil' hooty-corn is faster on his feet than a shot at coyote. He goes by me jest awhizzin' an' he does jest what he'd said he'd do. He takes off with a bouncin' jump an' he kicks fat Willie right where he's fattest.

Willie lets out a long thin gaspy whistle and falls over backwards, wraps his arms around his stomach, an' starts floppin' around like a fresh killed chicken.

Me, I'm scared stiff that Shoo-fly is gonna take himself a second sashay at fat Willie, but he don't. He steps back and sorta folds his arms.

"Let that be a lesson to you, Willie Weehaw," he says. "Don't ever go callin' I an' Ike an' Puggy names again. Mebbe we have to build this cussed fence, but we don't have to take any rawhidin' from such as you."

About that time there's a squawk from over by Willie's store, an' here comes Missis Jake Pickle on the dead run. She's got her grocery basket over one arm, an' she makes out like she's gonna take a swipe with it at Shoo-fly. So Shoo-fly he backs off kinda nimble.

Missis Jake, she bends over fat Willie and lets out a yell to wake the dead. "You've killed him, you horrid rowdies," she whoops. "His mouth's hangin' open an'

his eyes is rolled back. He's dyin'. Oh, poor Mister Weehaw, are you dyin'?"

"Glub—galloop!" says Willie, an' does some more floppin' around.

When Missis Jake yells it sounds like a steam engine whistle on a still night. Among others who come gallopin' up is Bosco Bates.

Bosco, he takes one look at fat Willie an' then turns on I and Puggy and Shoo-fly with a look in his eyes which gives me the cold shakes.

"Which one of you jiggers shot him?" growls Bosco. "Come on! Who threw the gun on Willie?"

"Nobody threw no gun on Willie," says Shoo-fly. "I took me a kick at him. He ain't dyin'. He's tryin' to git his breath back, whilst learnin' that it ain't no good judgment or manners to come pesticatin' around honest men that are doin' a honest job."

Bosco takes another look at Willie, who's finally got his breathin' apparatus workin' again. He still sounds like a hard run bronc with the heaves, but he gits up on one elbow an' looks around sorta stupid like.

Bosco comes back to us an' I can see he's plently relieved. But there's mean purpose in his eye an' I gets the hunch that Shoo-fly'll be headin' for that jail house in another minute. So I speaks up pert-like.

"Fat Willie had that comin', Bosco—the way he was standin' around criticisin' our work an' callin' us names. Besides, you chuck Shoo-fly in the flea pasture then I an' Puggy, we'll never git this arena built in time. We gotta have Shoo-fly to help, or we can't do her."

I can see things is hangin' in the balance, as the poet feller says, with Bosco turnin' matters over in his mind. About that time fat Willie gits back to his feet an' heads for his store, with Missis Jake holdin' him up.

"A'right," growls Bosco. "You three jaspers git back to work. An' I mean work! But any more fiddle-de-de, án' I lock you up in my jail house until the fleas knaw you right down to the quick. You hear me talkin'?"

We hears all right an' start scratchin' dirt like the devil was afoot. So pretty soon everybody drifts away an' things quiet down. Shoo-fly, he's workin' like a badger diggin' a fresh burrow, an' darn me if he ain't whistlin' to hisself, he's that contented an' happy.

The dang lil' scratch-cat!

WELL, SIR, the days go by an' things begin' shapin' up for the Cactus City Trail Bust, which is what they've named this here rodeo business. I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly, we've dug holes an' set posts an' nailed planks. We've picked up rocks, hoed weeds, grubbed sage brush and leveled things up pretty.

Jake Pickle, he's the Decoratin' Committee all by his lonesome, he's sashayed all over town hangin' flags and stringin' red white an' blue buntin' anywhere an' everywhere she'd string or hang. Jake ain't what you'd call a artistic soul. His idee of decoratin' is that twice as much as plenty is only half enough. Outside of that idee an' bein' color blind as a dead toad, Jake does hisself proud.

The word's been spread, far an wide an' already there's considerable folks from round about come driftin' into town. Among others is J. Horace Gladd. We don't see J. Horace git off'n the stage, but one day when I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly look up from our job of finishin' up the saddlin' chute, here J. Horace stands.

He's a short, round feller in a hard hat an' store clothes. He's got a red face, a mouthful of gold teeth an' a perpetual smile. He steps up to Puggy an' says, "I'm Gladd."

"Well, now," says Puggy, who at heart is a friendly sort of feller, "Well, now—that's fine. I'm glad, too. I'm glad that you're glad, pardner."

J. Horace's grin goes a little set. "You don't understand. I'm introducin' myself. I'm Gladd—J. Horace Gladd."

Puggy blinks a coupla times, then sticks out his hand. "Shake! I'm glad to meet—er, I mean I'm happy to know you, Mister Gladd. Shake hands with Ike Ferris and Shoo-fly Davis."

It's a good chance to rest a little, so I an' Shoo-fly crowd around. J. Horace says, "You boys look kinda hot an' thirsty. How about a lil' drink?"

He reaches under his coat an' pulls out a full, sealed pint. Puggy fastens on to it, quick, while I an' Shoo-fly watches, plumb anxious. Shoo-fly gets next drag an' I come last. I throws the empty flask over into a pile of weeds. J. Horace seems a little startled, but he keeps his grin workin'.

"Two things I like to see," he says. "That is men who handle their likker like men—and rodeos. I'm crazy about rodeos. Never miss one. I travel great distances, just to see rodeos. I like to see good bronc

twistin'. I pride myself I'm a very good judge of good bronc twistin'. You got some real good twisters in these parts?"

"Mister," says Puggy, "we got the best. There ain't no bronc toppers anywhere in the danged world kin outride our Cactus County boys."

"That's right," puts in Shoo-fly, that big snort of good likker wipin' out Shoo-fly's natural orneriness and makin' him real friendly. "When us Cactus County fellers get through twistin' a bronc, that bronc stays twisted."

"Well now," says J. Horace, "that's fine. That's wonderful. Who are some of your very best twisters?"

"Well, sir," says Puggy. "There's Lee Hanford an' Skeet Mustang an' Tye Carter an' Slim Dykes. Any of them boys can all rub a mean bronc down to a thin shadow."

"There's Bob Gipp an' Pete Piute," says I.

"An' Finn Francis," chirrups Shoo-fly. "Don't forget Finn Francis."

"I don't aim to forget any of 'em," says J. Horace, pullin' out a little book an' writin' the names down as we give 'em to him. "I like to have somethin' I can keep check on when a rider comes outa the chute. When any of these boys come out I'll be cheerin' for them extra loud, knowin' they're friends of yores."

J. Horace looks around. "A right nice lil' arena you boys are fixin' up. I can tell right now that this here Cactus City Trail Bust is gonna be a dinger. Well, that's what I like. A good rodeo, a big crowd, lots of good ridin'. See you boys again."

And away he goes, up town.

ABOUT THEN, here comes Bosco Bates to see what kinda job we been doin' on the saddlin' chute. Bosco takes a look after J. Horace an' asks, "Who's that jigger?"

"He's Gladd," says Puggy.

"The devil he is," grunts Bosco. "What about?"

"That's his name," explains Puggy. "Gladd. J. Horace Gladd. He likes rodeos."

"Hum!" says Bosco. "An' somebody around here likes likker. Where'd you three git holt of that red-eye?"

"J. Horace had her," chirrups Shoo-fly. "Prime stuff, too. A pint. Nice generous feller, J. Horace is."

"Don't git sore, Bosco," says I. "We've shore earned one lil' drink."

"See that you keep it to one," growls Bosco. "There's still plenty of things to be done an' the show gets under way day after tomorrow. Git busy!"

Like in all shows there's a big last minute rush. It starts next mornin', with folks pourin' into Cactus City from all points of the compass. There's cattlemen an' cowboys. There's sod-busters an' sheepherders. There's Mexicans an' warwhoops. There's peddlers an' gamblers. There's ladies an' there's kids.

I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly are plumb amazed. We never dreams there's that many people in Cactus County. Shanty Mike's International Hotel is plumb overflowin' with people. Every spare bunk in town is grabbed up. Them who comes too late to git other lodgin's, set up camps all around the edge of town. Tug Stevens nails open the doors of his Oasis saloon an' hires on three extra bartenders, for she's a thirsty crowd. Fat Willie Weehaw, still a lil' tender about the middle, works hisself to a froth groceryin' grub to the hungry. Yes, sir! Cactus City is rapid becomin' a madhouse.

On all sides there's jest one thing talked about. The rodeo—bronc twistin', bulldoggin', calf-ropin'. It's a kinda fever, an' the fust thing you know, durned if that fever don't catch holt of I an' Puggy an' Shoo-fly.

"I've flipped me plenty of calves in my time," brags Puggy. "When I want to, I can chuck a purty mean rope."

"More'n one cow critter I've bulldogged down," I says.

"Me," says Shoo-fly, "I've forked me plenty of rough broncs."

It all ends up with us borrowin' enough money from Bosco Bates to buy us a entry ticket, I for bull-doggin', Puggy for calf ropin' an' Shoo-fly for bronc twistin'. After which Shoo-fly says, "I'm goin' over to Bill Swaggert's blacksmith shop an' borrow his forge an' anvil an' tools for a spell. My spurs need tonin' up."

I an' Puggy leave Shoo-fly to his business an' take a sashay up an' down town. We've done our work, an' now we can play. We tips our hats over one eye an' we sets our boot heels down good an' solid. We're part an' parcel of this here rodeo, y'betcha, an' we feel plenty important.

We see J. Horace Gladd plenty of times. He's skitterin' here an' yon, talkin' to this 'un an' that 'un an' allus writin' things down in that book of his, so he'll remember who to cheer for. Once we sees him talkin' an' laughin' with a coupla strange

cowpokes I an' Puggy ain't never laid eyes on before. Both these cowpokes is long an' lean an' tough lookin', with a bow in their laigs which showed they'd sat saddle leather plenty in their time.

"That Gladd guy is shore one glad guy," observed Puggy. "Look at him, will yuh, Ike, talkin' an' laughin' with everybody. Friendly as a hound dawg pup, J. Horace is."

SHE'S A WILD day an' a wilder night. I an' Puggy meets up with lots of gents who are friendly an' big hearted. Most of 'em have a pint on their hips which they is willin' to share with a couple of kindred souls. So, along about midnight I sorta lose track of things. Puggy likewise. Next thing I know the sun is hurtin' my eyes an' somebody is shakin' me an' my head feels like she's all set to blow the top off.

I tries to fight off who's shakin' me, but no go. They won't let me be, so finally I sit up an' takes a look around. Puggy's not far away, holdin' his head an' groanin'. Our bed of misery is a pile of tin cans an' busted beer bottles out back of the Oasis. The guy who won't let us be is Shoo-fly Davis.

"C'mon, c'mon," nags Shoo-fly. "Pull yoreselves together, fellers. The big day is startin' to roll. They're formin' up for the grand peerade through town."

"I don't care if she's a grand peerade through the Pearly Gates," moans Puggy. "Lemme alone. Tha's all—jest lemme alone."

Of course Shoo-fly won't. He can be the stubbornest lil' hooty-corn as ever drawed breath. He stays with I' an' Puggy until he gets us on our feet an' movin'. My brains is still beatin' theirselves out, but by now I'm beginnin' to be able to see again. An' what I see!

I see Shoo-fly Davis wearin' a shirt so screamin' red it'd make a prairie fire hang its head in shame. Then he's got on a brand new pair of jeans about nine sizes too big for him. He's got the cuffs turned up until they reach plumb to his knees an' the rest of them blue jeans hang on him like a circus tent on a clothes pin.

"What's the big idee?" I wants to know. "You aimin' to be a clown, or what? That shirt is so loud it's positively indecent. And them jeans—!"

Shoo-fly jest shrugs an' struts a little. "A bronc twister has gotta be colorful, an' well dressed," says he. "I knew fat Willie Weehaw wouldn't sell me nothin' personal, rememberin' that kick in the brisket I give him. So I asked a feller to go buy these new clothes for me. I jest said for him to git a shirt with plenty of life to it an' I forgot to tell him what size jeans I wore. So he buys 'em and I wear 'em. I'm real partial to this shirt. Sort of catches the eye."

"Catches the eye ain't half of it," mumbles Puggy. "Blinds it is better an' closer to the truth. You oughter win the bronc twistin' hands down, Shoo-fly. Jest let the broncs get a look at you before you top 'em an' they'll quit like dawgs. They'll be afraid to buck with you. 'Fraid you'll explode like a giant fire-cracker. Ma-an! Do I crave black coffee!"

We manages to round up about a gallon of that black java, I an' Puggy do, so we're feelin' at least one-tenth human again when the big peerade starts. I gotta admit she's quite a peerade. As Grand Marshal, fat Willie Weehaw leads it, all dressed up like a cowboy fashion plate an' wearin' a brand new white ten gallon Stetson hat. He shore is proud of hisself, an' grinnin' like a baboon with a armful of fresh bananas.

"If'n fat Willie was up on a bronc that was at least one third alive," says Shoo-fly, "I'd be plumb tempted to stick a cockleburr under the bronc's tail an' plumb enjoy the fun an' hilarity that'd be sure to follow. But that pore ol' overloaded goat of a bangtail which Willie's picked out for hisself, couldn't manage jest one lil' bitty sheep jump was you to set its tail on fire."

Which is true enough. It's all that pore bronc can do to stagger along packin' fat Willie, let alone cuttin' any sashays.

So the peerade it winds up an' down the street a coupla times before headin' out to the arena. I see J. Horace Gladd clappin' his hands fit to bust an' cheerin' everytime fat Willie rides past him, an' does Willie love that!

I see somethin' else which makes me wonder a little. It's Bosco Bates and Buck Kyle with their heads together an' lookin' kinda stern. Buck, he owns the big Tepee outfit north of town an' next to Bosco Bates is about the toughest an' most influential citizen of Cactus County. An' who should the two of 'em be watchin' so cold like but J. Horace Gladd hisself. I can't figger that.

THE RODEO proper gits under way with a whoop an' a holler. But right

off'n the skillet comes the bull doggin', an' me I'm second on the list. By now I've plumb lost all ambition to bull dog even an anemic jack-rabbit, let alone a cow critter. But they call my name an' Shanty Mike, who's doin' the announcin', bellers through his meggyphone that it's Ike Ferris who's comin' out.

Which I does, an' the bronc I'm up on puts me right alongside that lumberin' cow critter. Now it mighta been that celebration which I an' Puggy had put on the night before, though I ain't a man to blame everythin' that goes wrong on a coupla drinks of likker.

But they's somethin' outa kilter, for when I makes my dive for that cow critter's horns, I over-shoot by mebbe six or eight feet. It's tough for a bull-dogger to over-shoot. Once he leaves his bronc there ain't a thing he can hang on to. I can't find a thing to hang on to, either. The ground jumps up an' hits me in the face. I skids along on my nose for a good five yards, plowin' up dirt an' a cobblestone which I an' Peggy an' Shoo-fly has overlooked. I'm plumb knocked shaky. I'm a sick Injun.

They packs me over an' lays me down in the shadder of the fence and for a while there I don't know an' I don't care who wins or who loses the bull-doggin' championship. I know the winner ain't goin' to be Ike Ferris.

I'm feelin' a lil' better when the calf ropin' starts, an' I sits up to watch Puggy do his stuff. Puggy's drawed plenty of calf, chunky lil' bull calf, chock full of ginger an' go. At that, Puggy makes a nice throw an' he gits down the rope purty fast an' neat. But when he grabs holt of the calf to flip it, she's a different story. They goes round an' round, the calf a-bawlin' an' Puggy sweatin' an cussin'. Finally Puggy gits the calf flipped an' reaches for his piggin' string to make the tie.

About that time the calf winds up a hind leg an' lets go. Whammo! Puggy gits nailed right square between the eyebrows an' the smile, an' he flattens out like he'd been hit with a meat ax. So they lugs poor Puggy over an' lay him down along side of me. Things has worked out tough for I and Puggy.

It ain't until the bronc bustin' gits under way that I an' Puggy is able to git up an' move around again. Already we're so sick of rodeos we hurt all over. Neither of us is what you'd call pretty to look at. It ain't in the cards for a man to plough up half an acre of hard ground with his face, or stop a calf's kick with his nose without pickin' up quite a few definite an' kinda disfigurin' signs of hard luck. But I an' Puggy aims to see our lil' partner Shoo-fly through his trials an' tribulations an' hope he has better luck than we do.

We find Shoo-fly over past the chute, sittin' on his saddle as cool an' unconcerned as you please. "Tough breaks, fellers," he chirrups. "But jest keep yore eyes on ol' Shoo-fly. He'll pull the honor of Cactus County through plumb pure an' unsullied. I hear there's a couple of slick un's entered in the twistin'. Strangers. Long, lean, mean-lookin' jiggers."

"Must be the two I and Ike saw talkin' to J. Horace Gladd, yestiday evenin'," mumbles Puggy.

"Joe Hawes an' Sid Humber is their names," says Shoo-fly. "You fellers tell me what kinda rides they make. I'm stayin' right here, savin' my energy."

So Puggy ambles over to the arena fence an' watches this Joe Hawes an' Sid Humber throw a coupla rides that are lulus. Puggy looks kinda discouraged when he comes back. "They're plenty good, them two," he reports. "Right now they rate one-two with the rides they've put on."

"Keep yore chins up," encourages Shoo-fly. "These is just the trials. Wait'll she shakes down to the semi-finals an' the finals. That's where you begin to separate the sheep from the goats. That's when they begin bringin' in the tough broncs, too."

PURTY SOON it's Shoo-fly's turn. I picks up his saddle to lug it over to the chute for him. That's when I notice he's tied on a extra long cinch. "What's the idee of so much cinch?" I wants to know. "This saddle is goin' on a horse, not a hippypotamus."

"I'm partial to a long cinch," says Shoo-fly. "I like to know my saddle won't slip. There's plenty of grip to a long cinch. A man who uses one never has a loose saddle under him."

So we cinches Shoo-fly's hull on a bronc called Catamount, a big, mean lookin' sorrel. Shoo-fly settles hisself in the saddle, rubbin' his laigs up and down some to git 'em snug. Shanty Mike yells to everybody to watch the chute, that it's Shoo-fly Davis comin' out on Catamount.

"Turn him loose!" yells Shoo-fly.

This Catamount is a power bucker an'

really takes all the kinks out. But dang me for a sheepherder if Shoo-fly don't make as purty a ride as you ever see. The crowd loves it, seein' that lil' hooty-corn up there with his hair an' whiskers flyin' an' that goshawful red shirt atwistin' an' humpin' through the dust. Yes-sir, Shoo-fly makes a clean straight-up ride an' he's glued to that bronc so tight the pick-up riders can't hardly lift him loose. The crowd whoops an' yells fit to bust itself. Right away we can see that Shoo-fly has took over number one spot for hisself.

Well, things shake on down the list an' things happen. Most of the boys find out that takin' the kinks outa a frisky bronc on a cold mornin' is a long way from makin' a good job of forkin' a tough, trained bucker that's learned all the tricks of the trade. So a lot of shirts git dusted an' the entry list keeps narrowin' down until all of a sudden here we are at the finals an' there's jest three left. This Joe Hawes an' Sid Humber an' Cactus County's last hope and prayer—Shoo-fly Davis.

Everybody is on edge an' loco with excitement. The crowd is all pullin' for Shoo-fly with all stops open. I looks around an' who do I see but J. Horace Gladd. Only he ain't near as glad for some reason as I first remember him. Right now there ain't a smidgin of a smile on his face. It's all snarl. His eyes is little and cold an' he's starin' at Shoo-fly like he wants nothin' better than a chance to cut Shoo-fly's throat from ear to ear. I'd have stepped over an' asked what he meant by that look, only right then the finals git goin'.

IT'S THIS Sid Humber who goes out first. He draws a kinda meek lookin' bay bronc named Soft Suzie. Only Suzie ain't soft. Suzie bucks on a dime, swappin' ends so fast as to be just a blur. Suzie wins a stirrup on this Humber jigger, then wins another. That's all for Sid Humber. He lands all spread out an' amazed lookin'.

It's Joe Hawes next. He draws Yellow Tiger, a buckskin. That Tiger angle is purty good. That bronc is rough. But Joe Hawes can ride, no foolin'. He's still up there when the timer's gun goes off, but it's plain to everybody that about two more jumps would have finished him. It's a ride, all right, but a ragged one. Still, it offers something for Shoo-fly to beat.

The crowd goes quiet. Here comes the pay-off. It's all up to Shoo-fly. He's drawed a big black named Dynamite. Anybody with half an eye can see this is the toughest bronc yet put in the chute. But Shoo-fly don't seem to be worried. He gits into his saddle, rubs his laigs up an' down a couple of times to git hisself set an' then the final go is on.

I swear I don't see how Shoo-fly does it. He ain't got enough weight to slug a bronc. By all the laws of force and gravity that black bronc shoulda bucked Shoo-fly Davis clear outa the county. The black tries —man, how he tries! The black starts the blood runnin' from Shoo-fly's nose an' down his whiskers. I'm scared stiff the bronc is gonna snap Shoo-fly's head plumb off'n his shoulders. I find myself prayin' for the timer's gun, so's Shoo-fly can get shut of that black chunk of concentrated TNT.

The timer's gun cracks. The yell the crowd lets go with I bet they heard clear across the Rocky Mountains. The crowd boils out into the arena, wanting to git their hands on Shoo-fly, the littlest, an' biggest hero Cactus County ever had. But the crowd ain't got a chance. Neither has the pick-up men. For that black bronc goes plumb mad, lines out for the south end of the arena and goes through the fence like it was made of matches. The last I see of that black bronc, Shoo-fly is still up there.

Somebody is beatin' me over the head an' screechin' like a Comanche. It's Puggy. I calm him down, for about that time I see Mister J. Horace Gladd an' them two tough lookin' twisters, Joe Hawes an' Sid Humber sort of start to sneak away from things. I see somethin' else. I see Bosco Bates an' Buck Kyle move up on 'em an' Bosco's got a gun out.

"Jest a minute, Mister Gladd," purrs Bosco. "We're hospitable folks, here in Cactus City. We like to make everybody welcome. But there's one breed we don't like. Them's tinhorns an' sure-thing gamblers. You're a viper, Mister Gladd, you an' these two pug-ugly friends of yores. We took you in with open arms an' you bit us. Now we're bitin' back. You made a lot of bets with us folks—a lot of bets. You figgered to win on the ridin' of these two ringers you brought in. But you lost. So I an' Buck here, aim to see that you pay those bets—every last red cent of 'em. If you can't—if you ain't got the money, why you'll wish you'd never been born."

It looks like J. Horace ain't got the money. Anyhow, he reaches for a shoul-

der holster gun. He don't get there. Bosco buffalos him, quick an' sudden. Buck Kyle tees off on Joe Hawes an' Joe piles up on J. Horace. Sid Humber sees the game is up, so he quits cold. I and Puggy help Bosco and Buck steer them three jiggers down to Bosco's flea pasture, where Bosco locks 'em up, good and solid.

No sooner do we git back to Bosco's office than in limps Shoo-fly, kinda pale around the gills, but plenty jaunty.

"I won, didn't I, Bosco?" he asks. "Jest cause that black bronc busted down the fence an' run don't disqualify me, does it?"

"You won," Bosco assures him. "You were up there, still aridin' pretty when the timer's gun went off. You'd made yore ride. After the gun went off it didn't make no difference if the bronc an' you had turned handsprings. Yeah, you lil' chunk of iniquity, you won. Now, hand 'em over."

Shoo-fly kinda gulps. "Hand what over?"

"You know what I mean," said Bosco, stickin' out his hand. "Them gadgets you made over in Bill Swaggert's blacksmith shop. Them steel hook arrangements. Come on—give 'em here."

Shoo-fly shrugs, sighs, bends over an' pulls up the legs of them over-size jeans he's wearin'. What I saw stopped me cold. Strapped to Shoo-fly's skinny shanks is a couple of curved-steel hooks, with the hooks on the inside of his laigs. The hooks curved up. Now I knew why, everytime Shoo-fly settled himself in the saddle, he kept rubbin' his legs up an' down. He

[*Turn page*]

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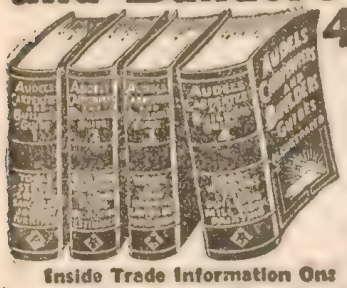

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was settin' those hooks into that long cinch he'd put on his hull. Once them hooks were set solid, a charge of powder couldn't have blasted Shoo-fly outa the saddle.

Now I knew why those jeans were so oversize. The legs were wide enough to hide the bulge of them hooks. Now I knew why that shirt was so screamin', screamin' red. It'd keep folks lookin' at the shirt an' not at the legs of the jeans. Now I knew that Shoo-fly Davis was the slickest schemin' lil' hooty-corn ever.

He unstraps them hooks, gives 'em to Bosco Bates. "I knew what J. Horace Gladd was up to, Bosco," he says. "I can spot a tinhorn as far as I can see one. I knew them two rough jiggers who reached the finals with me were ringers. An' I knew that if a Cactus County man didn't win the bronc twistin', the whole county would be broke. So, I figgered to win. You mad, Bosco?"

Bosco grinned, puttin' them hooks in his desk drawer an' lockin' it. "Me—mad? Shucks, no. You jest outslickered that slicker, J. Horace Gladd. The whole county owes you a vote of thanks. While me an' Buck, here, we're takin' you up to the Oasis an' buyin' the drinks. Mebbe four or five drinks. How about it, Buck?"

"Count me in all the way, Bosco. I feel like celebratin'."

"So do I," I hints hopeful like.

"An' me," offers up Puggy, the same.

"Sure," rumbles Bosco. "All of us."

So away we all went, arm in arm, ready to look the world in the eye an' call it good.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

FEUD BUSTERS

Another Shoo-fly, Puggy and Ike Story

By L. P. HOLMES

TRAIL TALK

(*Continued from page 10*)

of the shootings in the early days took place either in the post office or just outside of it. Texas at that time was anything but a Sunday School and El Paso was typical of most of the early towns of the Lone Star state.

A record compiled by W. W. Mills, who was customs collector for six years following the Civil War, shows that out of thirty young men employed by him during that time three were killed by Indians, one by robbers, one by a mob, two shot down on the streets, one ambushed while on a journey.

Cottonwood Bulletins

There was a cottonwood tree growing at the edge of the little village where bulletins were usually nailed, where one citizen might inform another and the public also that a certain citizen was a liar, a cheat or scoundrel. Here too, the landlady of the boarding house posted the names of her patrons who did not pay their bills. Difficulties arose between hot-tempered men and were settled promptly, settled usually in the style of the early West, by gunfire, and often one or more of those involved in such difficulties were buried after the meeting.

The fierce political feuds of Reconstruction days led to impromptu duels among the most prominent citizens, most of whom were ranged for or against the carpetbag administration of Governor Davis. Several of these were shot to death on El Paso streets. But though there were homicides, there were few thieves and no regular gangsters. These came with the railroads.

The Salt Lakes War

The "Salt Lakes War" at San Elizario was a particularly bitter and disturbing feud. It was brought about largely by the obstinacy of Judge Charles H. Howard, a hot-tempered man of impressive appearance who had served as an officer in the Confederate Army. The salt lakes had always been recognized as public property, and it was the custom of the Mexicans to haul salt from them free of charge. Many of the Mexicans gained their livelihood through the hauling of the salt. After his election as judge of the El Paso district, Howard bought

[*Turn page*]

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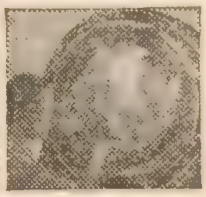

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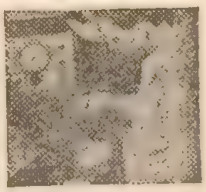

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land certificates at Austin and located the site of the salt deposits.

The judge immediately gave notice that no salt should be taken from the salt lakes without pay and permission. This aroused intense indignation on the part of the Mexicans, who threatened to disregard the recently-acquired rights of Howard.

The judge then had two of the more prominent Mexicans at San Elizario arrested for inciting to riot, whereupon a group of their friends released them and seized Howard.

There is little doubt that Howard would have been killed but for the efforts of Louis Cardis, an Italian who had gained the confidence of the Mexicans and had become their political leader. Howard was persuaded to sign an agreement to give up his claim and leave the state, but as soon as he was released and thought himself out of danger he repudiated this agreement on the ground that it had been obtained by duress.

However mistaken and callous Howard might have been, he was in a way only doing what many others had tried to do in taking over the possession of the salt lakes. Others had tried to do the same thing, including the leader of the Mexicans, Antonio Barajo, but they had not been quite so bold as Howard, although all of them saw in the lakes a means to fortune.

The Killing of Cardis

Because Cardis was an adviser of those opposing him, Howard became a bitter enemy of the Italian, claiming that the latter was conspiring to have him assassinated. Howard returned to El Paso a very angry hot-tempered man.

Cardis was a sub-contractor of the Texas and California Stage Company, which had its office at the store of Sam Schutz. He was in the store dictating a letter, sitting in a rocking-chair, when Judge Howard walked in, a double-barreled shotgun in his hands. Warned by Schutz, Cardis jumped up and found cover back of an office desk. Howard fired at his legs and when Cardis staggered out sent buckshot through his heart.

Howard fled to New Mexico and demanded of the Texas Governor that Texas Rangers be sent to San Elizario to protect him in his rights. The Governor authorized Major Jones, head of the Ranger force, to enlist a company of twenty at El Paso, and when this was done Lieutenant John B. Tays was put in command. Then Howard.

relying upon the Rangers for protection, returned to San Elizario.

His arrival was the signal for instant insurrection. The excitement was intense. Hundreds of armed Mexicans besieged the Ranger headquarters, where Tays barricaded doors and windows and cut portholes in the walls. The lieutenant refused to give up Howard, and for four days battle raged. A sergeant was killed, as was an American merchant named Ellis. Tays dragged the sergeant back to cover under fire.

The Surrender

Gradually the lines of the Mexicans drew closer. Their leaders asked for a conference, to which the Ranger lieutenant agreed. Bluntly, Barajo, the leader of the attacking force, told Tays that gunpowder would blow up the building if Howard was not turned over to them.

Tays reported to Howard, who at once decided that he must surrender to his enemies to save the others. He knew that he was

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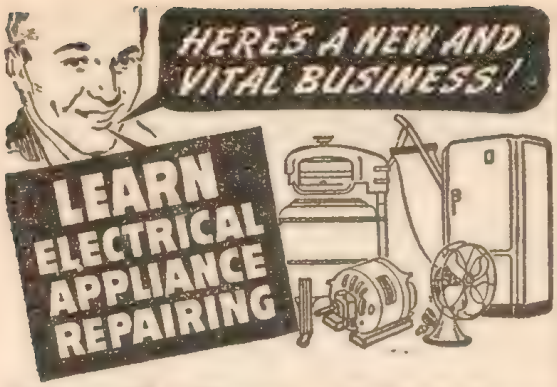

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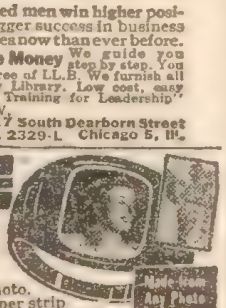

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going to his death when he and Tays walked out into the mob.

There has been, and probably always will be a difference of opinion as to just who was to blame for the surrender of the Rangers. Some blame Tays, and others blame John Atkinson, who was Howard's bondsman. However, the thought of Texas Rangers surrendering has rankled in the breast of the great law-enforcement organization ever since, and this is the only instance on record that we know of where any of the Rangers were forced to surrender.

Those who have followed along with the great Lone Star state's colorful peace organization believe that a strong officer, really worthy of the name of an officer in the Texas Rangers, would not have surrendered under any conditions.

They Died Bravely

After a long and stormy debate, during which time the firebrands of the attacking force wanted to kill all the "gringos" and the conservatives only Howard, a compromise was effected. The Judge, Atkinson, the bondsman, and Howard's agent McBride, were condemned to death by the firing squad. All of them met their fate bravely.

Howard was the first to be shot. He himself gave the word to fire. When it came the turn of Atkinson, he spoke to the mob in Spanish and reminded them that the party had surrendered under promise of safety. He was shouted down. Then, opening his shirt, he told them to fire at his heart.

When the bullets struck too low he kept his feet and flung an insult at the rifle squad for not being good marksmen. They continued to fire until they had finished him.

There were reprisals later. Five or six Mexicans were slain by the posse which went out to recover the bodies and to arrest the guilty, after which there was a Congressional investigation which produced no results. The Salt War gradually faded out. Both sides were ready to stop.

The Iron Horse

Soon after the Salt War was over and, in a measure, forgotten, four trunk railroads began laying their tracks across the desert toward El Paso. Before the first train arrived, however, El Paso had already been transformed into a hell-roaring American

boom town consisting mostly of saloons, gambling-houses, dance halls, and variety theatres. Keeping the peace in a boom town was always a sizeable job and El Paso was no exception. It was a wild, raw, rough frontier, with plenty of gunmen, and the law had to be wary.

After a time, as more and more gamblers and gunmen came to the booming town, and it got to be almost a common occurrence for fusillades of shots to be fired on the streets at night, many citizens were afraid to venture from their own doors. The mayor sent for the Texas Rangers, and for a week or so five of the stalwart sun-tanned gentlemen, famous for the nifty style in which they handled their six-guns in a pinch, paced the streets under the command of their captain, Jim Gillett, and no murmur of discord was heard.

The gamblers and gunmen had a tremendous respect for the Rangers, but the energetic young men with the big guns were not enrolled to "ride herd" on towns except

[*Turn page*]

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during emergencies, and presently the Rangers left town.

They were hardly out of town before things began to happen again and gun battles in the streets again became an almost common occurrence. In the very first gun battle after the departure of the Rangers, four men were killed.

Marshal Stoudenmire

El Paso had a new marshal about that time, and he was quick with his shooting irons. His name was Dallas Stoudenmire, and for a time he cowed a part of the lawless element. But they decided to do away with him and selected an ex-deputy marshal to ambush him.

This fellow, Bill Johnson, after filling himself with liquor, hid behind a pile of bricks and took two shots at Stoudenmire one night, but missed with both of them and was promptly killed by the marshal. Johnson's pals, who were on the scene and opened fire when they saw that the ambusher had missed, were chased out of town before the blazing guns of the marshal.

Later, John Wesley Hardin, already a notorious gunman, came to live in El Paso and he with the other gunmen helped to uphold the reputation of El Paso as a wild and rough frontier town where the man who was known to be the quickest on the draw had the best chance to live.

Finally, law and order got the better of the lawless element, and the gunmen were either killed off or driven out, as they were in other wild frontier towns when the West was in the process of being tamed.

Today El Paso is a thriving city of schools, churches and civic organizations, a prosperous little city and a good place to live in peace, as are other towns of the West where gunmen and outlaws once held sway.

This is the end of the trail, for now, so I'll be saying *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

ONE of the most highly-valued skills of the old range days was the ability to make a fast draw with a six-gun. Some of the fastest were outside the law. They were as swift—and as poisonous—as a striking

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When Rob Ranson killed an outlaw member of Twins McFee's gang, trouble was on the way and it came fast. The ranchers were organizing against McFee, but there was no time to get help for Ranson's Rafter R before McFee's men got there.

The odds were all against the little group defending the ranch. The renegades fired one of Ranson's big haystacks with a flaming arrow, and were about to fire another when something happened.

Standing on the plateau, shielded from the west by a huge boulder, a tall man stood with a rifle at his shoulder. A black domino mask covered the stranger's eyes, and a flowing black cape hung from his wide shoulders. An outlaw gasped when the stranger's rifle spat flatly, and Bob Ranson shouted the news to cowboys and outlaws alike.

"The Masked Rider!"

"Don't pick up that bow," a cold, stern voice spoke clearly. "Next time I won't throw off my shot!"

"Fire that stack!" Twins McFee roared. "That Masked Rider is wanted by the law the same as we are."

"Not the same," came the instant con-

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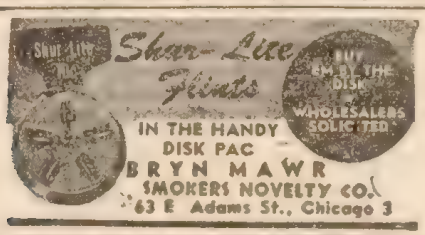

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tradiction. "I never shot a man in the back, or burned down an honest man's outfit."

A shot blasted out from a rock behind the big log-and-sod barn. The Masked Rider's rifle spoke again, and a scream of mortal agony told of his unerring accuracy.

"Ride off, McFee," the Masked Rider warned coldly. "Blue Hawk has one of your men under his gun, and you can't win."

"I'll tally for you and the redskin," McFee shouted hoarsely. "And I'll get Ranson if it's the last thing I do."

So they were off to a good start, and the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk, his loyal Yaqui aide, were enlisted once more in a finish fight for big stakes.

But the Robin Hood of the range wouldn't be half so effective in his wars if he didn't have the ability to change roles in a matter of brief minutes, at any time, and become plain Wayne Morgan, roving cowpuncher. Some smart folks had commented on the fact that wherever the Masked Rider showed up, that doggoned puncher seemed to be somewhere around, too. But no one except Blue Hawk knew for sure that the two were one and the same man.

Morgan went to work for Ranson, for fightin' pay—"hundred a month and shells."

But Wayne Morgan didn't have to wait to get himself formally on the payroll before he began to burn powder against the McFee gang. He shot a fellow who had tried to drygulch young Brad Blaine with a strangling rope—and of course that meant that Solo Frayne, McFee's segundo and one of the fastest gunnies in the whole of that Utah area, would want very specially to draw steel with Wayne Morgan—personal!

"Frayne is tall and lean," Blaine described the outlaw leader. "He's a cold killer, and mighty fast with a gun. Greenish eyes that seem always to be looking for trouble. Gun trouble," he added grimly.

The two men, one outside the law, the other within it, but both famed for the speed of their gun hands and their deadly ability to center their shots, were bound to meet sometime. They did.

Frayne was holding lovely Marian Caldwell a prisoner in a remote cabin. Morgan tracked him there, and the two men had it out. The situation was tense, and action, when it came, began with the suddenness of an explosion. Explosions, rather. Two guns talking. Lethal lead flying. Not only their own lives in the balance, but the life of a

girl in the cabin, slowly smothering to death.

That is one of many thrilling episodes in this story. And of course you've already guessed that the big shot, Twins McFee, leader of the renegade bunch, wanted most of all to meet the Masked Rider in gun combat. That had to happen, too. When it did, finally, the battle was one of the greatest exhibitions of shooting the West had ever seen.

The two big enemies were evenly matched. Neither asked odds, or would give odds. The lightning would strike one of them, and he would never hear the thunder. But he would go out, knowing that he had measured up as a man among men—and what did death matter to hombres like that?

As a second reading treat in this issue, be sure to turn to John C. Ropke's novelet, YOU CAN'T STAY ON TOP. It's a rodeo yarn, and different from anything you ever read before. It's the story of Ray Lucas, arena star, who was just about through because he had a bum leg that wasn't going to let him continue the gruelling business of riding the bad ones much longer.

And then there was young Eddie Brady,

[*Turn page*]

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SOME millions of years ago, farther back than most of us can remember, men began recording their thoughts and ideas and impressions in various ways, on tablets of stone and such. They graduated to parchment and to paper, and to the use of charcoal and later the pencil and the pen as writing instruments. But the way some of you folks shy away from writing a letter, one would think you had to do it the old, hard way, with a stone for a tablet and a mallet and chisel for pencil. Not all of you, because below you'll find excerpts from some recent letters and cards selected from our files.

I have just finished reading THE BATTLE OF MILE HIGH in MASKED RIDER WESTERN, and it was very exciting. In one of your future issues let's have Wayne Morgan's life story. Blue Hawk and Midnight stay in the background too much. Let Wayne get captured so we can have an exciting rescue—*Meyer Markon, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

I have been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN ever since 1939, and it is fine. I spent two years in the army, and I surely did miss good old Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk.—*George Craig, Gilmore, Texas.*

I have read a lot of western books, but never anything so good and so real as MASKED RIDER WESTERN. There is just enough shooting and talking to make it a good book. I can shoot, and ride a horse.—*Shirley Brendahl, Auburn, Maine.*

I have read two issues of MASKED RIDER WESTERN and found them very exciting and well written. There are scarcely any of them in Trinidad. I am writing because I have just bought one, containing WAR IN MASSACRE

BASIN, which pleased me very much.—*Charles Hospedales, Febeau Village, San Juan, Trinidad, B. W. I.*

I have been a fan of yours for years and have always enjoyed the magazine. I always love to read articles by Foghorn Clancy. I am just plumb western crazy. I remember as a boy I wanted to be a Texas ranger. Just finished THE HAUNTED HOLSTER, by Walker A. Tompkins. A fine story.—*Donald Gwiley, Newman, Ga.*

I have just finished the August issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. I wish you would have the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk play in an adventure in Oklahoma, the Indian Territory.—*"Rip," Houston, Texas.*

While I have read MASKED RIDER WESTERN for years, I have also read your companion magazines, and I think you do a fine job on all of them. Now a suggestion—why don't you tell us something about the authors?—*Leslie Wilson, Jr., Philadelphia, Pa.*

I think that MASKED RIDER WESTERN is the best magazine of all, and I have read quite a few of them. I would like to see some romance in the stories of Wayne Morgan, and also a little more about Midnight. And I think Blue Hawk stays in the background too much. Otherwise the book is fine. Keep up the good work.—*Hazel Heath, Trout Creek, Ontario, Canada.*

I have just finished reading THE TRAIL OF THE BLUE SNAKE and liked it very much. I keep up with Masked Rider stories every month. —*Frances Rambo, Humphrey, Arkansas.*

I have just read the August issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. I think we should have more of Puggy Jimson and his pals, and lots more of Watches John Vidlak. I didn't like the novelet, IN DOCTOR JIM'S BOOTS. Blue Hawk does not play a big enough part in the Masked Rider stories.—*Cuyler Allen Dunbar, Woodlawn, Tenn.*

That'll be about all for this time, pals. By the way, when you write us—and you will, of course—be sure to sign your name to the letter or card, not just "A Reader" or something like that. Please address The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N.Y. Thanks, everybody!

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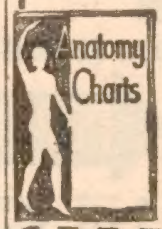

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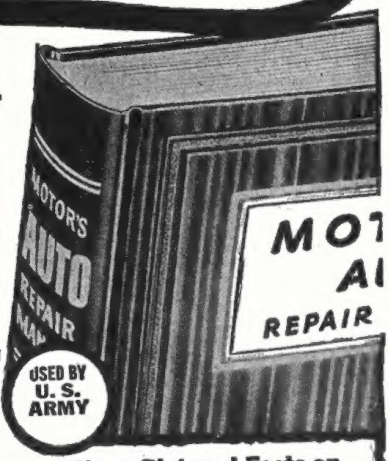

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